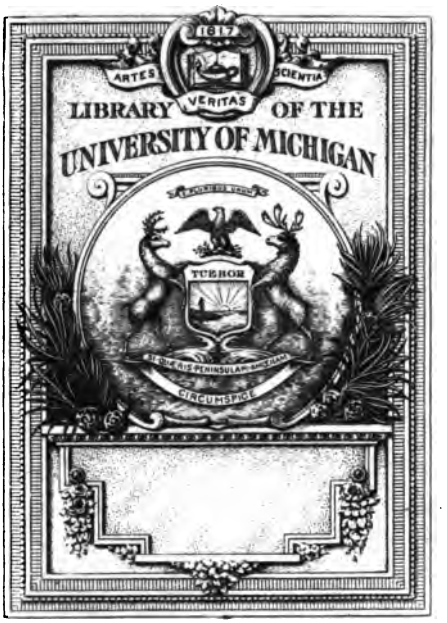

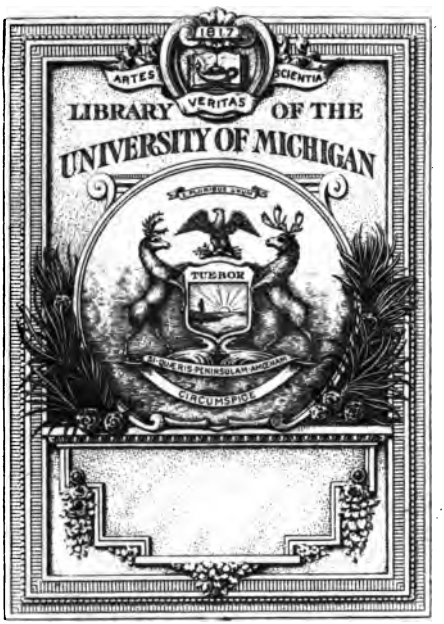

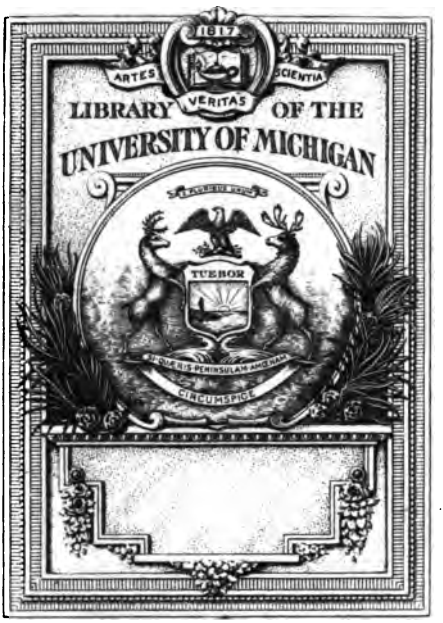

THE CHILDREN OF THE KING

THE

CHILDREN OF THE KING

A TALE OF SOUTHERN ITALY

BY

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CHAPTER VII

'I THOUGHT I was never to see you again,' observed the Marchesa, as Beatrice and San Miniato came to her side.

'Judging from your calm, you were bearing the separation with admirable fortitude,' answered the Count.

'Dearest friend, one has to bear so much in this life!'

Beatrice stood beside the table, resting one hand upon it and looking back towards the place where she had been sitting. San Miniato took

the Marchesa's hand and raised it to his lips, pressed it a little and then nodded slowly, with a significant look. The Marchesa's sleepy eyes opened suddenly with an expression of startled satisfaction, and she returned the pressure of the fingers with more energy than San Miniato had suspected. She was evidently very much pleased. Perhaps the greatest satisfaction of all was the certainty that she was to have no more trouble in the matter, since it had been undertaken, negotiated and settled by the principals between them. Then she raised her eyebrows and moved her head a little as though to inquire what had taken place, but San Miniato made her understand by a sign that he could not speak before Beatrice.

'Beatrice, my angel,' said the Marchesa, with

more than usual sweetness, 'you have sat so long upon that rock that you have almost reconciled me to Tragara. Do you not think that you could go back and sit there five minutes longer?'

Beatrice glanced quickly at her mother and then at San Miniato and turned away without a word, leaving the two together.

'And now, San Miniato carissimo,' said the Marchesa, 'sit down beside me on that chair, and tell me what has happened, though I think I already understand. You have spoken to Beatrice?'

'I have spoken—yes—and the result is favourable. I am the happiest of men.'

'Do you mean to say that she answered you at once?' asked the Marchesa, affecting, as usual, to be scandalised.

'She answered me—yes, dear Marchesa—she told me that she loved me. It only remains for me to claim the maternal blessing which you so generously promised in advance.'

Somehow it was a relief to him to return to the rather stiff and over-formal phraseology which he always used on important occasions when speaking to her, and which, as he well knew, flattered her desire to be thought a very great lady.

'As for my blessing, you shall have it, and at once. But indeed, I am most curious to know exactly what she said, and what you said—I, who am never curious about anything!'

'Two words tell the story. I told her I loved her and she answered that she loved me.'

'Dearest friend, how long it took you to say those two words! You must have hesitated a good deal.'

'To tell the truth, there was more said than that. I will not deny the grave imputation. I spoke of my past life——'

'Dio mio! To my daughter! How could you——' The Marchesa raised her hands and let them fall again.

'But why not?' asked San Miniato, suppressing a smile. 'Have I been such an impossibly bad man that the very mention of my past must shock a young girl—whom I love?' In the last words he found an opportunity to practise the expression of a little passion, and took advantage of it, well knowing that it would be useful in the immediate future.

'I never said that!' protested the Marchesa. 'But we all know something about you, dear Don Juan!'

'Calumnies, nothing but calumnies!'

'But such pretty calumnies—you might almost accept them. I should think none the worse of you if they were all true.'

'You are charming, dearest Marchesa. I kiss your generous hand! As a matter of fact, I only told Donna Beatrice—may I call her Beatrice to you now, as I have long called her in my heart? I only told her that I had been unhappy, that I had loved twice—once a woman who is dead, once another who has long ago forgotten me. That was all. Was it so very bad? Her heart was softened—she is so gentle! And then I told her that a greater and stronger passion than those

now filled my present life, and last of all I told her that I loved her.'

'And she returned the compliment immediately?' asked the Marchesa, slowly selecting a sugared chestnut from the plate beside her, turning it round, examining it and at last putting it into her mouth.

'How lightly you speak of what concerns life and death!' sighed San Miniato. 'No—Beatrice did not answer immediately. I said much more —far more than I can remember. How can you ask me to repeat word for word the unpremeditated outpourings of a happy passion? The flood has swept by, leaving deep traces—but who can remember where the eddies and rapids were?'

'You are very poetical, caro mio. Your language delights me — it is the language of

the heart. Pray give me one of those little cigarettes you smoke. Yes—and a light—and now the least drop of champagne. I will drink your health.'

'And I both yours and Beatrice's,' answered San Miniato, filling his own glass.

'You may put Beatrice first, since she is yours.'

'But without you there would be no Beatrice, gentilissima,' said the Count gallantly, when he had emptied his glass.

'That is true, and pretty besides. And so,' continued the Marchesa in a tone of languid reflection, 'you have actually been making love to my daughter, beyond my hearing, alone on the rocks—and I gave you my permission, and now you are engaged to be married! It is too extra-

ordinary to be believed. That was not the way I was married. There was more formality in those days.'

Indeed, she could not imagine the deceased Granmichele throwing himself upon his knees at her feet, even upon the softest of carpets.

'Then I thank the fates that those days are over!' returned San Miniato.

'Perhaps I should, too. I am not sure that the conclusion would have been so satisfactory, if I had undertaken to persuade Beatrice. She is headstrong and capricious, and so painfully energetic! Every discussion with her shortens my life by a year.'

'She is an angel in her caprice,' answered the Count with conviction. 'Indeed, much of her charm lies in her changing moods.'

'If she is an angel, what am I?' asked the Marchesa. 'Such a contrast!'

'She is the angel of motion—you are the angel of repose.'

'You are delightful to-night.'

While this conversation was taking place, Beatrice had wandered away over the rocks alone, not heeding the unevenness of the stones and taking little notice of the direction of her walk. She only knew that she would not go back to the place where she had sat, not for all the world. A change had taken place already and she was angry with herself for what she had done in all sincerity.

She was hurt and her first illusion had suffered a grave shock almost at the moment of its birth. She asked herself how it could be possible, if San

Miniato loved her as he had said he did, that he should not feel as she felt and understand love as she did—as something secret and sacred, to be kept from other eyes. Her instinct told her easily enough that San Miniato was at that very moment telling her mother all that had taken place, and she bitterly resented the thought. It would surely have been enough, if he had waited until the following day and then formally asked her hand of the Marchesa. It would have been better, more natural in every way, just now when they had gone up to the table, if he had said simply that they loved one another and had asked her mother's blessing. Anything rather than to feel that he was coolly describing the details of the first love scene in her life—the thousandth, perhaps, in his own.

After all, did she love him? Did he really love her? His passionate manner when he had seized her hand had moved her strangely, and she had listened with a sort of girlish wonder to his declarations of devotion afterwards. But now, in the calm moonlight and quite alone, she could hear Ruggiero's deep strong voice in her ears, and the few manly words he had uttered. There was not much in them in the way of eloquence—a sailor's picturesque phrase—she had heard something like it before. But there had been strength, and the power to do, and the will to act in every intonation of his speech. She remembered every word San Miniato had spoken, far better than he would remember it himself in a day or two, and she was ready to analyse and criticise now what had charmed and pleased her a moment

earlier. Why was he going over it all to her mother, like a lesson learnt and repeated? She was so glad to be alone—she would have been so glad to think alone of what she had taken for the most delicious moment of her young life. If he were really in earnest, he would feel as she did and would have said at once that it was late and time to be going home—he would have invented any excuse to escape the interview which her mother would try to force upon him. Could it be love that he felt? And if not, as her heart told her it was not, what was his object in playing such a comedy? She knew well enough, from Teresina, that many a young Neapolitan nobleman would have given his title for her fortune, but Teresina, perhaps for reasons of her own, never dared to cast such an aspersion upon San

Miniato, even in the intimate conversation which sometimes takes place between an Italian lady and her maid—and, indeed, if the truth be told, between maids and their mistresses in most parts of the world.

But the doubt thrust itself forward now. Beatrice was quick to doubt at all times. She was also capricious and changeable about matters which did not affect her deeply, and those that did were few enough. It was certainly possible that San Miniato, after all, only wanted her money and that her mother was willing to give it in return for a great name and a great position. She felt that if the case had been stated to her from the first in its true light she might have accepted the situation without illusion, but without disgust. Everybody, her mother said, was

married by arrangement, some for one advantage, some for the sake of another. After all, San Miniato was better than most of the rest. There was a certain superiority about him which she would like to see in her husband, a certain simple elegance, a certain outward dignity, which pleased her. But when her mother had spoken in her languid way of the marriage, Beatrice had resented the denial of her free will, and had answered that she would please herself or not marry at all. The Marchesa, far too lacking in energy to sustain such a contest, had contented herself with her favourite expression of horror at her daughter's unfilial conduct. Now, however, Beatrice felt that if it had all been arranged for her, she would have been satisfied, but that since San Miniato had played something very like a

comedy, she would refuse to be duped by it. She was very bitter against him in the first revulsion of feeling and treated him more hardly in her thoughts than he, perhaps, deserved.

And there he was, up there by the table, telling her mother of his success. Her blood rose in her cheeks at the thought and she stamped her foot upon the rock out of sheer anger at herself, at him, at everything and everybody. Then she moved on.

Ruggiero was standing at the edge of the water looking out to sea. The moonlight silvered his white face and fair beard and accentuated the sharp black line where his sailor's cap crossed his forehead. Wild and angry emotions chased each other from his heart to his brain and back again, firing his overwrought nerves and heated blood,

as the flame runs along a train of powder. He heard a light step behind him and turned suddenly. Beatrice was close upon him.

'Is that you, Ruggiero?' she asked, for she had seen him with his back turned and had not recognised him at first.

'Yes, Excellency,' he answered in a hoarse voice, touching his cap.

'What a beautiful night it is!' said the young girl. She often talked with the men in the boat, and Ruggiero interested her especially at the present moment.

'Yes, Excellency,' he answered again.

'Is the weather to be fine, Ruggiero?'

'Yes, Excellency.'

Ruggiero was apparently not in the conversational mood. He was probably thinking of the

girl he loved—in all likelihood of Teresina, as Beatrice thought. She stood still a couple of paces from him and looked at the sea. She felt a capricious desire to make the big sailor talk and tell her something about himself. It would be sure to be interesting and honest and strong, a contrast, as she fancied, to the things she had just heard.

'Ruggiero——' she began, and then she stopped and hesitated.

'Yes, Excellency.'

The continual repetition of the two words irritated her. She tried to frame a question to which he could not give the same answer.

'I would like you to tell me who it is whom you love so dearly—is she good and beautiful and sensible, too, as you said?'

'She is all that, Excellency.' His voice shook, not as it seemed to her with weakness, but with strength.

'Tell me her name.'

Ruggiero was silent for some moments, and his head was bent forward. He seemed to be breathing hard and not able to speak.

'Her name is Beatrice,' he said at last, in a low, firm tone as though he were making a great effort.

'Really!' exclaimed the young girl. 'That is my name, too. I suppose that is why you did not want to tell me. But you must not be afraid of me, Ruggiero. If there is anything I can do to help you, I will do it. Is it money you need? I will give you some.'

'It is not money.'

'What is it, then?'

'Love—and a miracle.'

His answers came lower and lower, and he looked at the ground, suffering as he had never suffered and yet indescribably happy in speaking with her, and in seeing the interest she felt in him. But his brain was beginning to reel. He did not know what he might say next.

'Love and a miracle!' repeated Beatrice in her silvery voice. 'Those are two things which I cannot get for you. You must pray to the saints for the one and to her for the other. Does she not love you at all then?'

'She will never love me. I know it.'

'And that would be the miracle—if she ever should? Such miracles have been done by men themselves without the help of the saints, before now.'

Ruggiero looked up sharply and he felt his hands shaking. He thought she was speaking of what had just happened, of which he had been a witness.

'Such miracles as that may happen—but they are the devil's miracles.'

Beatrice was silent for a moment. She was indeed inclined to believe in a special intervention of the powers of evil in her own case. Had she not been suddenly moved to tell a man that she loved him, only to discover a moment later that it was a mistake?

'What is the miracle you pray for, Ruggiero?' she asked after a pause.

'To be changed into some one else, Excellency.'

'And then—would she love you?'

'By Our Lady's grace—perhaps!' The deep

voice shook again. He set his teeth, folded his arms over his throbbing breast, and planted one foot firmly on a stone before him, as though to await a blow.

'I am very sorry for you, Ruggiero,' said Beatrice in soft, kind tones.

'God render you your kindness—it is better than nothing,' he answered.

'Is she sorry for you, too? She should be—you love her so much.'

'Yes—she is sorry for me. She has just said so.' He raised his clenched hand to his mouth almost before the words were uttered. Beatrice did not see the few bright red drops that fell upon the rock as he gnawed the flesh.

'Just said so?' she said, repeating his words. 'I do not understand? Is she here to-night?'

He did not answer, but slowly bent his head, as though in assent. An odd foreboding of danger shot through the young girl's heart. Little as the man said, he seemed desperate. It was possible that the girl he loved might be a Capriote, and that he might have met her and talked with her while the dinner was going on. He might have strangled her with those great hands of his. She would not have uttered a cry, and no one would be the wiser, for Tragara is a lonely place, by day and night.

'She is here, you say?' Beatrice asked again. 'Where is she? Ruggiero, what is the matter? Have you done her any harm? Have you hurt her? Have you killed her?'

'Not yet——'

'Not yet!' Beatrice cried, in a low horror-

struck tone. She had heard his sharp, agonised breathing as he reeled unsteadily against the rock behind him. She was a rarely courageous girl. Instead of shrinking she made a step forward and took him firmly by the arm.

'What have you done, Ruggiero?' she asked sternly.

He felt that she was accusing him. His face grew ashy white, and grave—almost grand, she thought afterwards, for she remembered long the look he wore. His answer came slowly in deep, vibrating tones.

'I have done nothing—but love her.'

'Show her to me—take me to her,' said Beatrice, still dreading some horrible deed, she scarcely knew why.

'She is here.'

'Where?'

'Here!——Ah, Christ.'

His great hands went out madly as though to take her, then tenderly touched the loose sleeves she wore, then fell, as though lifeless, to his sides again.

Beatrice passed her hand over her eyes and drew back quickly a step. She was startled and angered, but not frightened. It was almost the repetition of the waking dream that had flitted through her brain before she had landed. She had heard the grand ring of passionate love this once at least — and how? In the voice of a common sailor—out of the heart of an ignorant fellow who could neither read nor write, nor speak his own language, a churl, a peasant's son, a labourer—but a man, at least. That was it—a

strong, honest, fearless man. That was why it all moved her so—that was why it was not an insult that this low-born fellow should dare to tell her he loved her. She opened her lids again and saw his great figure leaning back against the rock, his white face turned upward, his eyes half closed. She went near to him again. Instantly, he made an effort and stood upright. Her instinct told her that he wanted neither pity nor forgiveness nor comfort.

'You are a brave, strong man, Ruggiero; I will always pray that you may love some one who will love you again—since you can love so well.'

The unspoiled girl's nature had found the right expression, and the only one. Ruggiero looked at her one moment, stooped and touched

the hem of her white frock with two fingers and then pressed them silently to his lips. Who knows from what far age that outward act of submission and vassalage has been handed down in southern lands? There it is to this day, rarely seen, but still surviving and still known to all.

Then Ruggiero turned away and went up the sloping rocks again, and Beatrice stood still for a moment, watching his tall, retreating figure. She meant to go, too, but she lingered a while, knowing that if ever she came back to Tragara, this would be the spot where she would pause and recall a memory, and not that other, where she had sat while San Miniato played out his wretched little comedy.

It all rushed across her mind again, bringing a

new sense of disgust and repulsion with it, and a new blush of shame and anger at having been so deceived. There was no doubt now. The contrast had been too great, too wide, too evident. It was the difference between truth and hearsay, as San Miniato had said once that night. There was no mistaking the one for the other.

Poor Ruggiero! that was why he was growing pale and thin. That was why his arm trembled when he helped her into the boat. She leaned against the rock and wondered what it all meant, whether there were really any justice in heaven or any happiness on earth. But she would not marry San Miniato, now, for she had given no promise. If she had done so, she would not have broken it—in that, at least, she was like other girls of her age and class. Next to evils of which she

knew nothing, the breaking of a promise of marriage was the greatest and most unpardonable of sins, no matter what the circumstances might be. But she was sure that she had not promised anything.

At that moment in her meditations she heard the tread of a man's heel on the rocks. The sailors were all barefoot, and she knew it must be San Miniato. Unwilling to be alone with him even for a minute, she sprang lightly forward to meet him as he came. He held out his hand to help her, but she refused it by a gesture and hurried on.

'I have been speaking with your mother,' he said, trying to take advantage of the thirty or forty yards that still remained to be traversed.

'So I supposed, as I left you together,' she

answered in a hard voice. 'I have been talking to Ruggiero.'

'Has anything displeased you, Beatrice?' asked San Miniato, surprised by her manner.

'No. Why do you call me Beatrice?' Her tone was colder than ever.

'I supposed I might be permitted——'

'You are not.'

San Miniato looked at her in amazement, but they were already within earshot of the Marchesa, who had not moved from her long chair, and he did not risk anything more, not knowing what sort of answer he might get. But he was no novice, and as soon as he thought over the situation he remembered others similar to it in his experience, and he understood well enough that a sensitive young girl might feel ashamed of having shown

too much feeling, or might have taken offence at some detail in his conduct which had entirely escaped his own notice. Young and vivacious women are peculiarly subject to this sort of sensitiveness, as he was well aware. There was nothing to be done but to be quiet, attentive in small things, and to wait for fair weather again. After all, he had crossed the Rubicon, and had been very well received on the other side. It would not be easy to make him go back again.

'My angel,' said the Marchesa, throwing away the end of her cigarette, 'you have caught cold. We must go home immediately.'

'Yes, mamma.'

With all her languor and laziness and selfishness, the Marchesa was not devoid of tact, least of all where her own ends were concerned, and

when she took the trouble to have any object in life at all. She saw in her daughter's face that something had annoyed her, and she at once determined that no reference should be made to the great business of the moment, and that it would be best to end the evening in general conversation, leaving San Miniato no further opportunity of being alone with Beatrice. She guessed well enough that the girl was not really in love, but had yielded in a measure to the man's practised skill in love-making, but she was really anxious that the result should be permanent.

Beatrice was grateful to her for putting an end to the situation. The young girl was pale and her bright eyes had suddenly grown tired and heavy. She sat down beside her mother and shaded her brow against the lamp with her hand,

while San Miniato went to give orders about returning.

'My dear child,' said the Marchesa, 'I am converted; it has been a delightful excursion; we have had an excellent dinner, and I am not at all tired. I am sure you have given yourself quite as much trouble about it as San Miniato.'

Beatrice laughed nervously.

'There were a good many things to remember,' she said, 'but I wish there had been twice as many—it was so amusing to make out the list of all your little wants.'

'What a good daughter you are to me, my angel,' sighed the Marchesa.

It was not often that she showed so much affection. Possibly she was rarely conscious of loving her child very much, and on the present

occasion the emotion was not so overpowering as to have forced her to the expression of it, had she not seen the necessity for humouring the girl and restoring her normal good temper. On the whole, a very good understanding existed between the two, of such a nature that it would have been hard to destroy it. For it was impossible to quarrel with the Marchesa, for the simple reason that she never attempted to oppose her daughter, and rarely tried to oppose any one else. She was quite insensible to Beatrice's occasional reproaches concerning her indolence, and Beatrice had so much sense, in spite of her small caprices and whims, that it was always safe to let her have her own way. The consequence was that difficulties rarely arose between the two.

Beatrice smiled carelessly at the affectionate

speech. She knew its exact value, but was not inclined to depreciate it in her own estimation. Just then she would rather have been left alone with her mother than with any one else, unless she could be left quite to herself.

'You are always very good to me, mamma,' she answered; 'you let me have my own way, and that is what I like best.'

'Let you have it, carissima! You take it. But I am quite satisfied.'

'After all, it saves you trouble,' laughed Beatrice.

Just then San Miniato came back and was greatly relieved to see that Beatrice's usual expression had returned, and to hear her careless, tuneful laughter. In an incredibly short space of time the boat was ready, the Marchesa was

lifted in her chair and carried to it, and all the party were aboard. The second boat, with its crew, was left to bring home the paraphernalia, and Ruggiero cast off the mooring and jumped upon the stern, as the men forward dipped their oars and began to pull out of the little sheltered bay.

There he sat again, perched in his old place behind his master, the latter's head close to his knee, holding the brass tiller in his hand. It would be hard to say what he felt, but it was not what he had felt before. It was all a dream, now, the past, the present and the future. He had told Beatrice—Donna Beatrice Granmichele, the fine lady—that he loved her, and she had not laughed in his face, nor insulted him, nor cried out for help. She had told him that he was brave

and strong. Yet he knew that he had put forth all his strength and summoned all his courage in the great effort to be silent, and had failed. But that mattered little. He had got a hundred, a thousand times more kindness than he would have dared to hope for, if he had ever dared to think of saying what he had really said. He had been forced to what he had done, as a strong man is forced struggling against odds to the brink of a precipice, and he had found not death, but a strange new strength to live. He had not found Heaven, but he had touched the gates of Paradise and heard the sweet clear voice of the angel within. It was well for him that his hand had not been raised that afternoon to deal the one blow that would have decided his life. It was well that it was the summer time and that when he had put

the helm down to go about there had been no white squall seething along with its wake of snowy foam from a quarter of a mile to windward. It would have been all over now and those great moments down there by the rocks would never have been lived.

'Through the arch, Ruggiero,' said San Miniato to him as the boat cleared the rocks of the landward needle.

'Let us go home,' said Beatrice, with a little impatience in her voice. 'I am so tired.'

Would she be tired of such a night if she loved the man beside her? Ruggiero thought not, any more than he would ever be weary of being near her to steer the boat that bore her—even for ever.

'It is so beautiful,' said San Miniato.

Beatrice said nothing, but made an impatient movement that betrayed that she was displeased.

'Home, Ruggiero,' said San Miniato's voice.

'Make sail!' Ruggiero called out, he himself hauling out the mizen. A minute later the sails filled and the boat sped out over the smooth water, white-winged as a sea-bird under the great summer moon.

CHAPTER VIII

It was late on the following morning when the Marchesa came out upon her curtained terrace, moving slowly, her hands hanging listlessly down, her eyes half closed, as though regretting the sleep she might be still enjoying. Beatrice was sitting by a table, an open book beside her which she was not reading, and she hardly noticed her mother's light step. The young girl had spent a sleepless night, and for the first time since she had been a child a few tears had wet her pillow. She could not have told exactly why she had cried, for she had not felt anything like sadness,

and tears were altogether foreign to her nature. But the unsought return of all the impressions of the evening had affected her strangely, and she felt all at once shame, anger and regret—shame at having been so easily deceived by the play of a man's face and voice, anger against him for the part he had acted, and regret for something unknown but dreamt of and almost understood, and which could never be. She was too young and girlish to understand that her eyes had been opened upon the workings of the human heart. She had seen two sights which neither man nor woman can ever forget, love and love's counterfeit presentment, and both were stamped indelibly upon the unspotted page of her maiden memory.

She had seen a man whom she had hitherto liked, and whom she had unconsciously respected

for a certain dignity he seemed to have, degrade himself—and for money's sake, as she rightly judged—to the playing of a pitiful comedy. As the whole scene came back to her in all distinctness, she traced the deception from first to last with amazing certainty of comprehension, and she knew that San Miniato had wilfully and intentionally laid a plot to work upon her feelings and to produce the result he had obtained—a poor result enough, if he had known the whole truth, yet one of which Beatrice was sorely ashamed. She had been deceived into the expression of something which she had never felt—and which, this morning, seemed further from her than ever before. It was bitter to think that any man could say she had uttered those three words 'I love you,' when there was less truth in them

than in the commonest, most pardonable social lie. He had planned the excursion, knowing how beautiful things in nature affected her, knowing exactly at what point the moon would rise, precisely at what hour that mysterious light would gleam upon the water, knowing the magic of the place and counting upon it to supplement his acting where it lacked reality. It had been clever of him to think it out so carefully, to plan each detail so thoughtfully, to behave so naturally until his opportunity was all prepared and ready for him. But for one little mistake, one moment's forgetfulness of tact, the impression might have remained and grown in distinctness until it would have secured the imprint of a strong reality at the beginning of a new volume in her life, to which she could always look back

in the hereafter as to something true and sweet to be thought of. But his tact had failed him at the critical and supreme moment when he had got what he wanted and had not known how to keep it, even for an hour. And his mistake had been followed by a strange accident which had revealed to Beatrice the very core of a poor human heart that was beating itself to death, in true earnest, for her sake.

She had seen what many a woman longs for but may never look upon. She had seen a man, brave, strong, simple and true, with the death mark of his love for her upon his face. What matter if he were but an unlettered sailor, scarcely knowing what moved him nor the words he spoke? Beatrice was a woman and, womanlike, she knew without proof or testimony that his

heart and hands were clean of the few sins which woman really despises in man.

They are not many—be it said in honour of womanly generosity and kindness—they are not many, those bad deeds which a woman cannot forgive, and that she is right is truly shown in that those are the sins which the most manly men despise in others. They are, I think, cowardice, lying for selfish ends, betraying tales of woman's weakness — almost the greatest of crimes—and, greatest of all, faithlessness in love.

Let a man be brave, honest, discreet, faithful, and a woman will forgive him all manner of evil actions, even to murder and bloodshed; but let him flinch in danger, lie to save himself, tell the name of a woman whose love for him has betrayed her, or break his faith to her without boldly

saying that he loves her no more, and she will not forgive him while he lives, though she may give him a kindly thought and a few tears when he is gone for ever.

So Beatrice, who could never love Ruggiero, understood him well and judged him rightly, and set him up on a sort of pedestal as the anti-type of his scheming master. And not only this. She felt deeply for him and pitied him with all her heart, since she had seen his own almost breaking before her eyes for her sake. She had always been kind to him, but henceforth there would be something even kinder in her voice when she spoke to him, as there would be something harder in her tone when she talked with San Miniato.

And now her mother had appeared and settled

herself in her lazy way upon her long chair, and slowly moved her fan, from habit, though too indolent to lift it to her face. Beatrice rose and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

'Good morning, mamma carissima,' she said. 'Are you very tired after the excursion?'

'Exhausted, in mind and body, my angel. A cigarette, my dear—it will give me an appetite.'

Beatrice brought her one, and held a match for her mother. Then the Marchesa shut her eyes, inhaled the smoke and blew out four or five puffs before speaking again.

'I want to speak to you, my child,' she said at last, 'but I hardly have the strength.'

'Do not tire yourself, mamma. I know what you are going to say, and I have made up my mind.'

'Have you? That will save me infinite trouble. I am so glad.'

'Are you really? Do you know what I mean?'

'Of course. You are going to marry San Miniato, and we have the best excuse in the world for going to Paris to see about your trousseau.'

'I will not marry San Miniato,' said Beatrice. 'I have made up my mind that I will not.'

The Marchesa started slightly as she took her cigarette from her lips, and turned her head slowly so that she could look into Beatrice's eyes.

'You are engaged to marry him,' she said slowly. 'You cannot break your word. You know what that means. Indeed, you are quite mad!'

'Engaged? I? I never gave my word! It is not true!' The blood rose in Beatrice's face and then sank suddenly away.

'What is this comedy?' asked the Marchesa, raising her brows. For the first time in many years she was almost angry.

'Ah! If you ask me that, I will tell you. I will tell you everything and you know that I speak the truth to you as I do to everybody——'

'Except to San Miniato when you tell him you love him,' interrupted the Marchesa.

Beatrice blushed again, with anger this time.

'Yes,' she said, after a short pause, 'it is quite true that I said I loved him, and for one moment I meant it. But I made a mistake. I am sorry, and I will tell him so. But I will tell him other things, too. I will tell him that I saw through

his acting before we left Tragara last night, and that I will never forgive him for the part he played. You know as well as I that it was all a play, from beginning to end. I liked him better than the others because I thought him more manly, more honest, more dignified. But I have changed my mind. I see the whole truth now, every detail of it. He planned it all, and he did it very well—probably he planned it the night before last, out here with you, while I was playing waltzes. You could not make me marry him, and he got leave of you to speak to me. Do you think I do not understand it all? Would you have let me go away last night and sit with him on the rocks, out of your hearing, without so much as a remark, unless you had arranged the matter between you? It is not like you, and I

know you meant it. It was all a plot. He had even been there to study the place, to see the very point at which the moon would rise, the very place where he would make me sit, the very spot where your table could stand. He said to himself that I was a mere girl, that of course no man had ever made love to me and that between the beauty of the night, my liking for him, and his well-arranged comedy, he might easily move me. He did. I am ashamed of it. Look at the blood in my cheeks! That tells the truth, at all events. I am utterly ashamed. I would give my right hand to have not spoken those words! I would almost give my life to undo yesterday if it could be undone—and undo it I will, so far as I can. I will tell San Miniato what I think of myself, and then I will tell him what I think of him, and that

will be enough. Do you understand me? I am in earnest.'

The Marchesa had listened to Beatrice's long speech with open eyes, surprised at the girl's keenness and at her determined manner. Not that the latter was new in her experience, but it was the first time that their two wills had been directly opposed in a matter of great importance. The Marchesa was a very indolent person, but somewhere in her nature there lay hidden a small store of determination which had hardly ever expressed itself clearly in her life. Now, however, she felt that much was at stake. For many reasons San Miniato was precisely the son-in-law she desired. He would give Beatrice an ancient and honourable name, a leading position in any Italian society he chose to frequent, whether in

the north or the south, and he was a man of the world at all points. The last consideration had much weight with the Marchesa, who in spite of her title and fortune had seen very little of the men of the great world, and admired them accordingly. Therefore when Beatrice said she would not marry him, her mother made up her mind that she should, and the struggle commenced.

'Beatrice, my angel,' she began, 'you are mistaken in yourself and in San Miniato. I am quite unable to go through all the details as you have done. I only say that you are mistaken.'

Beatrice's lip curled a little and she slowly shook her head.

'I am not mistaken, mamma,' she answered. 'I am quite right, and you know it. Can you deny that what I say is true? Can you say that

you did not arrange with him to take me to Tragara, and to let him speak to me himself?'

'It is far too much trouble to deny anything, my dear child. But all that may be quite true, and yet he may love you as sincerely as he can love any one. I do not suppose you expect a man of his sense and education to roll himself at your feet and tear his hair and his clothes as they do on the stage.'

'A man need not do that to show that he is in earnest, and besides he——'

'That is not the question,' interrupted the Marchesa. 'The real question concerns you much more than it affects him. If you break your promise——'

'There was no promise.'

'You told him that you loved him, and you

admit it. Under the circumstances that meant that you were willing to marry him. It meant nothing else, as you know very well.'

'I never thought of it.'

'You must think of it now. You know perfectly well that he wished to marry you and had my consent. I have spoken to you several times about it and you refused to have him, saying that you meant to exercise your own free will. You had an opportunity of exercising it last night. You told him clearly that you loved him, and that could only mean that your opposition was gone and that you would marry him. You know what you will be called now, if you refuse to keep your engagement.'

Beatrice grew slowly pale. Her mother had, for once, a remarkably direct and clear way of

putting the matter, and the young girl began to waver. If her mother succeeded in proving to her that she had really bound herself, she would submit. It is not easy to convey to the foreign mind generally the enormous importance which is attached in Italy to a distinct promise of marriage. It indeed almost amounts, morally speaking, to marriage itself and the breaking of it is looked upon socially almost as an act of infidelity to the marriage bond. A young girl who refuses to keep her engagement is called a civetta—an owlet—probably because owlets are used as a decoy all over the country in snaring and shooting all small birds. Be that as it may, the term is a bitter reproach, it sticks to her who has earned it and often ruins her whole life. That is what the Marchesa meant when she told Beatrice that she

knew what the world would call her, and the threat had weight.

The young girl rose from her seat and began to walk to and fro on the terrace, her head bent, her hands clasped together. The Marchesa slowly puffed at her cigarette and watched her daughter with half-closed eyes.

'I never meant it so!' Beatrice exclaimed in low tones, and she repeated the words again and again, pausing now and then and looking fixedly at her mother.

'Dear child,' said the Marchesa, 'what does it matter? If it were not such an exertion to talk, I am sure I could make you see what a good match it is, and how glad you ought to be.'

'Glad! Oh, mamma, you do not understand! The degradation of it!'

'The degradation? Where is there anything degrading in it?'

'I see it well enough! To give myself up body and soul to a man I do not love! And for what? Because he has an old name, and I a new one, and I can buy his name with my money. Oh, mother, it is too horrible! Too low! Too vile!'

'My angel, you do not know what strong words you are using——'

'They are not half strong enough—I wish I could——'

But she stopped and began to walk up and down again, her sweet young face pale and weary with pain, her fingers twisting each other nervously. A long silence followed.

'It is of no use to talk about it, my child,' said

the Marchesa, languidly taking up a novel from the table beside her. 'The thing is done. You are engaged, and you must either marry San Miniato or take the consequences and be pointed at as a faithless girl for the rest of your life.'

'And who knows of this engagement, if it is one, but you and I and he?' asked Beatrice, standing still. 'Would you tell, or I? Or would he dare?'

'He would be perfectly justified,' answered the Marchesa. 'He is a gentleman, however, and would be considerate. But who is to assure us that he has not already telegraphed the good news to his friends?'

'It is too awful!' cried Beatrice, leaning back against one of the pillars.

'Besides,' said her mother without changing

her tone. 'You have changed to-day, you may change again to-morrow——'

'Stop, for heaven's sake! Do not make me worse than I am!'

Poor Beatrice stopped her ears with her open hands. The Marchesa looked at her and smiled a little, and shook her head, waiting for the hands to be removed. At last the young girl began her walk again.

'You should not talk about being worse when you are not bad at all, my dear,' said her mother. 'You have done nothing to be ashamed of, and all this is perfectly absurd. You feel a passing dislike for the idea perhaps, but that will be gone to-morrow. Meanwhile the one thing which is really sure is that you are engaged to San Miniato, who, as I say, has undoubtedly telegraphed the

fact to his sister in Florence and probably to two or three old friends. By to-morrow it will be in the newspapers. You cannot possibly draw back. I have really talked enough. I am utterly exhausted.'

Beatrice sank into a chair and pressed her fingers upon her eyes, not to hide them, but by sheer pressure forcing back the tears she felt coming. Her beautiful young figure bent and trembled like a willow in the wind, and the soft white throat swelled with the choking sob she kept down so bravely. There is something half divine in the grief of some women.

'Dear child,' said her mother very gently, 'there is nothing to cry over. Beatrice carissima, try and control yourself. It will soon pass——'

'It will soon pass—yes,' answered the young

girl, bringing out the words with a great effort. During fully two minutes more she pressed her eyes with all her might. Then she rose suddenly to her feet, and her face was almost calm again.

'I will marry him, since what I never meant for a promise really is one and has seemed so to you and to him. But if I am a faithless wife to him, I will lay all my sins at your door.'

'Beatrice!' cried the Marchesa, in real horror this time. She crossed herself.

'I am young—shall I not love?' asked the young girl defiantly.

'Dearest child, for the love of Heaven do not talk so——'

'No—I will not. I will never say it again—and you will not forget it.'

She turned to leave the terrace and met San Miniato face to face.

'Good morning,' she said coldly, and passed him.

'Of course you have telegraphed the news of the engagement to your sister?' said the Marchesa as soon as she saw him, and making a sign to intimate that he must answer in the affirmative.

'Of course—and to all my best friends,' he replied promptly with a ready smile. Beatrice heard his answer just as she passed through the door, but she did not turn her head. She guessed that her mother had asked the question in haste in order that San Miniato might say something which should definitely prove to Beatrice that he considered himself betrothed. Yesterday she would have believed his answer. To-day she be-

lieved nothing he said. She went to her room and bathed her eyes in cold water and sat down for a moment before her glass and looked at herself thoughtfully. There she was, the same Beatrice she saw in the mirror every day, the same clear brown eyes, the same soft brown hair, the same broad, crayon-like eyebrows, the same free pose of the head. But there was something different in the face, which she did not recognise. There was something defiant in the eyes, and hard about the mouth, which was new to her and did not altogether please her, though she could not change it. She combed the little ringlets on her forehead and dabbed a little scent upon her temples to cool them, and then she rose quickly and went out. A thought had struck her and she at once put into execution the plan it suggested.

She took a parasol and went out of the hotel, hatless and gloveless, into the garden of orange trees which lies between the buildings and the gate. She strolled leisurely along the path towards the exit, on one side of which is the porter's lodge, while the little square stone box of a building which is the telegraph office stands on the other. She knew that just before twelve o'clock Ruggiero and his brother were generally seated on the bench before the lodge waiting for orders for the afternoon. As she expected, she found them, and she beckoned to Ruggiero and turned back under the trees. In an instant he was at her side. She was startled to see how pale he was and how suddenly his face seemed to have grown thin. She stopped and he stood respectfully before her, cap in hand, looking down.

'Ruggiero,' she said, 'will you do me a service?'

'Yes, Excellency.'

'Yes, I know—but it is something especial. You must tell no one—not even your brother.'

'Speak, Excellency—not even the stones shall hear it.'

'I want you to find out at the telegraph office whether your master has sent a telegram anywhere this morning. Can you ask the man and bring me word here? I will walk about under the trees.'

'At once, Excellency.'

He turned and left her, and she strolled up the path. She wondered a little why she was doing this underhand thing. It was not like her, and whatever answer Ruggiero brought her she

would gain nothing by it. If San Miniato had spoken the truth, then he had really believed the engagement already binding, as her mother had said. If he had lied, that would not prevent his really telegraphing within the next half hour, and matters would be in just the same situation with a slight difference of time. She would, indeed, in this latter case, have a fresh proof of his duplicity. But she needed none, as it seemed to her. It was enough that he should have acted his comedy last night and got by a stratagem what he could never have by any other means. Ruggiero returned after two or three minutes.

'Well?' inquired Beatrice.

'He sent one at nine o'clock this morning, Excellency.'

For one minute their eyes met. Ruggiero's

were fierce, bright and clear. Beatrice's own softened almost imperceptibly under his glance. If she had seen herself at that moment she would have noticed that the hard look she had observed in her own face had momentarily vanished, and that she was her gentle self again.

'One only?' she asked.

'Only one, Excellency. No one will know that I have asked, for the man will not tell.'

'Are you sure? What did you say to him? Tell me.'

'I said to him, "Don Gennaro, I am the Conte di San Miniato's sailor. Has the Conte sent any telegram this morning, to any one, anywhere?" Then he shook his head; but he looked into his book and said, "He sent one to Florence at nine

o'clock." Then I said, "I thank you, Don Gennaro, and I will do you a service when I can." That was for good manners. Then I said, "Don Gennaro, please not to tell any one that I asked the question, and if you tell any one I will make you die an evil death, for I will break all your bones and moreover drown you in the sea, and go to the galleys very gladly." Then Don Gennaro said that he would not tell. And here I am, Excellency.'

In spite of all she was suffering, Beatrice laughed at Ruggiero's account of the interview. It was quite evident that Ruggiero had repeated accurately every word that had been spoken, and he looked the man to execute the threat without the slightest hesitation. Beatrice wondered how the telegraph official had taken it.

'What did Don Gennaro do when you frightened him, Ruggiero?' she asked.

'He said he would not tell and got a little white, Excellency. But he will say nothing, and will not complain to the syndic, because he knows my brother.'

'What has that to do with it?' asked Beatrice with some curiosity.

'It is natural, Excellency. For if Don Gennaro went to the syndic and said, "Signor Sindaco, Ruggiero of the Children of the King has threatened to kill me," then the syndic would send for the gendarmes and say, "Take that Ruggiero of the Children of the King and put him in, as we say, and see that he does not run away, for he will do a hurt to somebody." And perhaps they would catch me and perhaps

they would not. Then Bastianello, my brother, would wait in the road in the evening for Don Gennaro, and would lay a hand on him, perhaps, or both. And I think that Don Gennaro would rather be dead in his telegraph office than alive in Bastianello's hands, because Bastianello is very strong in his hands, Excellency. And that is all the truth.'

'But I do not understand it all, Ruggiero, though I see what you mean. I am afraid it is your language that is different from mine.'

'It is natural, Excellency,' answered the sailor, a deep blush spreading over his white forehead as he stood bareheaded before her. 'You are a great lady and I am only an ignorant seaman.'

'I do not mean anything of the sort, Ruggiero,' said Beatrice quickly, for she saw that she had

unintentionally hurt him, and the thought pained her strongly. 'You speak very well and I have always understood you perfectly. But you spoke of the King's Children and I could not make out what they had to do with the story.'

'Oh, if it is that, Excellency, I ask your pardon. I do not wonder that you did not understand. It is my name, Excellency.'

'Your name? Still I do not understand——'

'I have no other name but that—dei figli del Rè—' said Ruggiero. 'That is all.'

'How strange!' exclaimed Beatrice.

'It is the truth, Excellency, and to show you that it is the truth here is my seaman's license.'

He produced a little flat parchment case from his pocket, untied the thong and showed Beatrice

the first page on which was inscribed his name in full.

'Ruggiero of the Children of the King, son of the late Ruggiero, native of Verbicaro, province of Calabria — you see, Excellency. It is the truth.'

'I never doubt anything you say, Ruggiero,' said Beatrice quietly.

'I thank you, Excellency,' answered the sailor, blushing this time with pleasure. 'For this and all your Excellency's kindness.'

What a man he was she thought, as he stood there before her, bareheaded in the sun-shot shade under the trees, the light playing upon his fair hair and beard, and his blue eyes gleaming like drops from the sea! What boys and dwarfs other men looked beside him!

'Do you know how your family came by that strange name, Ruggiero?' she asked.

'No, Excellency. But they tell so many silly stories about us in Verbicaro. That is in Calabria where I and my brother were born. And when our mother, blessed soul, was dying—good health to your Excellency—she blessed us and said this to us. "Ruggiero, Sebastiano, dear sons, you could not save me and I am going. God bless you," said she. "Our Lady help you. Remember, you are the Children of the King." Then she said, "Remember" again, as though she would say something more. But just at that very moment Christ took her, and she did not speak again, for she was dead—good health to your Excellency for a thousand years. And so it was.'

'And what happened then?' asked Beatrice, strangely interested and charmed by the man's simple story.

'Then we beat Don Pietro Casale, Excellency, and spoiled all his face and head. We were little boys, twelve and ten years old, but there was the anger to give us strength. And so we ran away from Verbicaro, because we had no one and we had to eat, and had beaten Don Pietro Casale, who would have had us put in prison if he had caught us. But thanks to Heaven we had good legs. And so we ran away, Excellency.'

'It is very interesting. But what were those stories they told about you in Verbicaro?'

'Silly stories, Excellency. They say that once upon a time King Roger came riding by with all his army and many knights; and all armed

because there was war. And he took Verbicaro from the Turks and gave it to a son of his who was called the Son of the King, as I would give Bastianello half a cigar or a pipe of tobacco in the morning—it is true he always has his own—and so the Son of the King stayed in that place and lived there, and I have heard old men say that when their fathers—who were also old, Excellency—were boys, many houses in Verbicaro belonged to the Children of the King. But then they ate everything and we have had nothing but these two hands and these two arms and now we go about seeking to eat. But thanks to Heaven—and to-day is Saturday—we have been able to work enough. And that is the truth, Excellency.'

'What a strange tale!' exclaimed the young

girl. 'But to-day is Tuesday, Ruggiero. Why do you say it is Saturday?'

'I beg pardon of your Excellency, it is a silly custom and means nothing. But when a man says he is well, or that there is a west wind, or that his boat is sound, he says "to-day is Saturday," because it might be Friday and he might have forgotten that. It is a silly custom, Excellency.'

'Do not call me excellency, Ruggiero,' said Beatrice. 'I have no right to be called so.'

'And what could I call you when I have to speak to you, Excellency? I have been taught so.'

'Only princes and dukes and their children are excellencies,' answered Beatrice. 'My father was only a Marchese. So if you wish to please

me, call me "signorina." That is the proper way to speak to me.'

'I will try, Excellency,' answered Ruggiero, opening his blue eyes very wide. Beatrice laughed a little.

'You see,' she said, 'you did it again.'

'Yes, Signorina,' replied Ruggiero. 'But I will not forget again. When the tongue of the ignorant has learned a word it is hard to change it.'

'Well, good-day Ruggiero. Your story is very interesting. I am going to breakfast, and I thank you for what you did for me.'

'It is not I who deserve any thanks. And good appetite to you, Signorina.' She turned and walked slowly back towards the hotel.

'And may Our Lady bless you and keep you,

and send an angel to watch over every hair of your blessed head!' said Ruggiero in a low voice as he watched her graceful figure retreating in the distance.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER what had happened on the previous evening Ruggiero had expected that Beatrice would treat him very differently. He had assuredly not foreseen that she would call him from his seat by the porter's lodge, ask an important service of him, and then enter into conversation with him about the origin of his family and the story of his own life. His slow but logical mind pondered on these things in spite of the disordered action of his heart, which had almost choked him while he had been talking with the young girl. Instead of going back to his brother, he turned aside and

entered the steep descending tunnel through the rock which leads down to the sea and the little harbour.

Two things were strongly impressed on his mind. First, the nature of the service he had done Beatrice in making that enquiry at the telegraph office, and secondly her readiness to forget his own reckless conduct at Tragara. Both these points suggested reflections which pleased him strangely. It was quite clear to him that Beatrice distrusted San Miniato, though he had of course no idea of the nature of the telegram concerning which she had wanted information. He only understood that she was watching San Miniato with suspicion, expecting some sort of foul play. But there was an immense satisfaction in that thought, and Rug-

giero's eyes sparkled as he revolved it in his brain.

As for the other matter, he understood it less clearly. He was quite conscious of the enormity of his misdeed in telling a lady, and a great lady, according to his view, that he loved her, and in daring to touch the sleeves of her dress with his rough hands. He could not find it in him to regret what he had done, but he was prepared for very hard treatment as his just reward. It would not have surprised him if Beatrice had then and there complained of him to her mother or to San Miniato himself, and the latter, Ruggiero supposed, would have had no difficulty in having him locked up in the town gaol for a few weeks on the rather serious ground of misdemeanour towards the visitors at the watering-place. A

certain amount of rather arbitrary power is placed in the hands of the local authorities in all great summer resorts, and it is quite right that it should be so—nor is it as a rule unjustly used.

But Beatrice had acted very differently, very kindly and very generously. That was because she was naturally so good and gentle, thought Ruggiero. But the least he had expected was that she would never again speak to him save to give an order, nor say a kind word, no matter what service he rendered her, or what danger he ran for her sake. And now, a moment ago, she had talked with him with more interest and kindly condescension than she had ever shown before. He refused, and rightly, to believe that this was because she had needed his help in the matter of the telegram. She could have called

Bastianello, who was in her own service, and Bastianello would have done just as well. But she had chosen to employ the man who had so rudely forgotten himself before her less than twenty-four hours earlier. Why? Ruggiero, little capable, by natural gifts or by experience, of dealing with such questions, found himself face to face with a great problem of the human self, and he knew at once that he could never solve it, try as he might. His happiness was none the less great, nor his gratitude the less deep and sincere, and with both these grew up instantly in his heart the strong determination to serve her at every turn, so far as lay in his power.

It was not much that he could do, he reflected, unless she would show him the way as she had done this very morning. But, considering the

position of affairs, and her evident distrust of her betrothed, it was not impossible that similar situations might arise before long. If they did, Ruggiero would be ready, as he had now shown himself, to do her bidding with startling directness and energy. He was well aware of his physical superiority over every one else in Sorrento, and he was dimly conscious that a threat from him was something which would frighten most men, and which none could afford to overlook. He remembered poor Don Gennaro's face just now, when he had quietly told him what he might expect if he did not hold his tongue. Ruggiero had never valued his life very highly, and since he had loved Beatrice he did not value it a straw. This state of mind can make a man an exceedingly dangerous person, especially when he is so endowed

that he can tear a new horse shoe in two with his hands, and break a five franc piece with his thumbs and forefingers as another man breaks a biscuit.

As Ruggiero came out of the tunnel and reached the platform of rock from which the last part of the descent goes down to the sea in the open air, he stood still a moment and expressed his determination in a low tone. There was no one near to hear him.

'Whatever she asks,' he said. 'Truly it is of great importance what becomes of me! If it is a little thing it costs nothing. If it is a great thing —well, I will do it if I can. Then I will say, "Excellency"—no—"Signorina, here it is done. And I beg to kiss your Excellency's hand, because I am going to the galleys and you will not see

me any more." And then they will put me in, and it will be finished, and I shall always have the satisfaction.'

Ruggiero produced a fragment of a cigar from his cap and a match from the same safe place and began to smoke, looking at the sea. People not used to the peculiarities of southern thought would perhaps have been surprised at the desperate simplicity of Ruggiero's statement to himself. But those who have been long familiar with men of his country and class must all have heard exactly such words uttered more than once in their experience, and will remember that in some cases at least they were not empty threats, which were afterwards very exactly and conscientiously fulfilled by him who uttered them, and who now either wears a green cap at Ponza or Ischia, or is

making a fortune in South America, having had the luck to escape as a stowaway on a foreign vessel.

Nor did it strike Ruggiero as at all improbable that Beatrice might some day wish to be rid of the Conte di San Miniato, and might express such a wish, ever so vaguely, within Ruggiero's hearing. He had the bad taste to judge her by himself, and of course if she really hated her betrothed she would wish him to die. It was a sin, doubtless, to wish anybody dead, and it was a greater sin to put out one's hands and kill the person in question. But it was human nature, according to Ruggiero's simple view, and of course Beatrice felt like other human beings in this matter and all the principal affairs of life. He had made up his mind, and he never repeated the words he had

spoken to himself. He was a simple man, and he puffed at his stump of a black cigar and strolled down to the boat to find out whether the Cripple and the Son of the Fool had spliced that old spare mooring-rope which had done duty last night and had been found chafed this morning.

Meanwhile the human nature on which Ruggiero counted so naturally and confidently was going through a rather strange phase of development in the upper regions where the Marchesa's terrace was situated.

Beatrice walked slowly back under the trees. Ruggiero's quaint talk had amused her and had momentarily diverted the current of her thoughts. But the moment she left him, her mind reverted to her immediate trouble, and she felt a little stab of pain at the heart which was new to her.

The news that San Miniato had actually sent a telegram was unwelcome in the extreme. He had, indeed, said in her presence that he had sent several. But that might have been a careless inaccuracy, or he might have actually written the rest and given them to be despatched before coming upstairs. To doubt that the one message already sent contained the news of his engagement, seemed gratuitous. It was only too sure that he had looked upon what had passed at Tragara as a final decision on the part of Beatrice, and that henceforth she was his affianced bride. Her mother had not even found great difficulty in persuading her of the fact, and after that one bitter struggle she had given up the battle. It had been bitter indeed while it had lasted, and some of the bitterness returned upon her now. But she

would not again need to force the tears back, pressing her hands upon her eyes with desperate strength as she had done. It was useless to cry over what could not be helped, and since she had made the great mistake of her life she must keep her word or lose her good name for ever, according to the ideas in which she had been brought up. But it would be very hard to meet San Miniato now, within the next quarter of an hour, as she inevitably must. Less hard, perhaps, than if she had convicted him of falsehood in the matter of the telegram, as she had fully expected that she could—but painful enough, heaven knew.

There was an old trace of oriental fatalism in her nature, passed down to her, perhaps, from some Saracen ancestor in the unknown genealogy of her family. It is common enough in the south,

often profoundly leavened with superstition, sometimes existing side by side with the most absolute scepticism, but its influence is undeniable, and accounts for a certain resignation in hopeless cases which would be utterly foreign to the northern character. Beatrice had it, and having got the worst of the first contest she conceived that further resistance would be wholly useless, and accepted the inevitable conclusion that she must marry San Miniato whether she liked him or not. But this state of mind did not by any means imply that she would marry him with a good grace, or ever again return in her behaviour towards him to the point she had reached on the previous evening. That, thought Beatrice, would be too much to expect, and was certainly more than she intended to give. She would be quite

willing to show that she had been deceived into consenting, and was only keeping her word as a matter of principle. San Miniato might think what he pleased. She knew that whatever she did, he would never think of breaking off the engagement, since what he wanted was not herself but her fortune. She shut her parasol with a rather vicious snap as she went into the cool hall out of the sun, and the hard look in her face was more accentuated than before, as she slowly ascended the steps.

The conversation between her mother and San Miniato during her short absence had been characteristic. They understood each other perfectly but neither would have betrayed to the other, by the merest hint, the certainty that the marriage was by no means agreeable to poor Beatrice herself.

'Dearest Marchesa,' said San Miniato, touching her hand with his lips, and then seating himself beside her, 'tell me that you are not too much exhausted after your exertions last night. Have you slept well? Have you any appetite?'

'What a good doctor you would make, dear friend!' exclaimed the Marchesa with a little smile.

And so they exchanged the amenities usual at their first meeting in the day, as though they had not been buying and selling an innocent soul, and did not appreciate the fact in its startling reality. Several more phrases of the same kind were spoken.

'And how is Donna Beatrice?' inquired San Miniato at last.

'Why not call her Beatrice?' asked the Mar-

chesa carelessly. 'She is very well. You just saw her.'

'I fancy it would seem a little premature, a little familiar to call her so,' answered the Count, who remembered his recent discomfiture. 'For the present, I believe she would prefer a little more ceremony. I do not know whether I am right. Pray give me your advice, Marchesa carissima.'

'Of course you are right—you always are. You were right about the moon yesterday—though I did notice that it was shining here when we came home,' she added thoughtfully, not by any means satisfied with the insufficient demonstration he had given her at first.

'No doubt,' replied San Miniato indifferently. He took no further interest in the movements of

the satellite since he had gained his point, and the Marchesa was far too lazy to revive the discussion. 'I am glad you agree with me about my behaviour,' he continued. 'It is of course most important to maintain as much as possible the good impression I was so fortunate as to make last night, and I have had enough experience of the world to know that it will not be an easy matter.'

'No, indeed—and with Beatrice's character, too!'

'The most charming character I ever met,' said San Miniato with sufficient warmth. 'But young, of course, as it should be and subject to the enchanting little caprices which belong to youth and beauty.'

'Yes, which always belong to youth and beauty,' assented the Marchesa.

'And I am quite prepared, for instance, to be treated coldly to-day and warmly to-morrow, if it so pleases the dear young lady. She will always find me the same.'

'How good you are, dearest friend!' exclaimed the Marchesa, thoroughly understanding what he meant, and grateful to him for his tact, which was sometimes, indeed, of the highest order.

'It would be strange if I were not happy and satisfied,' he answered, 'and ready to accept gratefully the smallest favour with which it may please Donna Beatrice to honour me.'

He was indeed both happy and satisfied, for he saw no reason to suppose that the Granmichele fortune could now slip from his grasp. Moreover he had considerable confidence in himself and his powers, and he thought it quite probable that the

scene of the previous evening might before long be renewed with more lasting effect. Beatrice was young and capricious; there is nothing one may count on so surely as youth and caprice. Caprice is sure to change, but who is sure that the faith kept for ten years will not? In youth love is sure to come some day, but when that day is past is it ever sure that he will come again? San Miniato knew these things and many more like them, and was wise in his generation as well as a man of the world, accustomed to its ways from his childhood and nourished with the sour milk of its wisdom from his earliest youth upward.

So he quietly conveyed to the Marchesa the information that he understood Beatrice's present mood and that he would not attach more importance to it than it deserved. They talked a little

longer together, both for the present avoiding any reference to the important arrangements which must soon be discussed in connection with the marriage contract, but both taking it entirely for granted that the marriage itself was quite agreed upon and settled.

Then Beatrice returned and sat down silently by the table.

'Have you been for a little walk, my angel?' inquired her mother.

'Yes, mamma, I have been for a little walk.'

'You are not tired then, after our excursion, Donna Beatrice?' inquired San Miniato.

'Not in the least,' answered the young girl, taking up a book and beginning to read.

'Beatrice!' exclaimed her mother in amazement. 'My child! What are you reading!

Maupassant! Have you quite forgotten yourself?'

'I am trying to, mamma. And since I am to be married—what difference does it make?'

She spoke without laying down the volume. San Miniato pretended to pay no attention to the incident, and slowly rolled a fat cigarette between his fingers to soften it before smoking. The Marchesa made gestures to Beatrice with an unusual expenditure of energy, but with no effect.

'It seems very interesting,' said the latter. 'I had no idea he wrote so well. It seems to be quite different from Télémaque—more amusing in every way.'

Then the Marchesa did what she had not done in many years. She asserted her parental

authority. Very lazily she put her feet to the ground, laid her fan, her handkerchief and her cigarette case together, and rose to her feet. Coming round the table she took the forbidden book out of Beatrice's hands, shut it up and put it back in its place. Beatrice made no opposition, but raised her broad eyebrows wearily and folded her hands in her lap.

'Of course, if you insist, I have nothing to say,' she remarked, 'any more than I have anything to do since you will not let me read.'

The Marchesa went back to her lounge and carefully arranged her belongings and settled herself comfortably before she spoke.

'I think you are a little out of temper, Beatrice dear, or perhaps you are hungry, my child. You so often are. San Miniato, what time is it?'

'A quarter before twelve,' answered the Count.

'Of course you will breakfast with us. Ring the bell, dearest friend. We will not wait any longer.'

San Miniato rose and touched the button.

'You are as hospitable as you are good,' he said. 'But if you will forgive me, I will not accept your invitation to-day. An old friend of mine is at the other hotel for a few hours and I have promised to breakfast with him. Will you excuse me?'

Beatrice made an almost imperceptible gesture of indifference with her hand.

'Who is your friend?' she asked.

'A Piedmontese,' answered San Miniato indifferently. 'You do not know him.'

'We are very sorry to lose you, especially

to-day, San Miniato carissimo,' said the Marchesa. 'But if it cannot be helped—well, good-bye.'

So San Miniato went out and left the mother and daughter together again as he had found them. It is needless to say that the Piedmontese friend was a fiction, and that San Miniato had no engagement of that kind. He had hastily resolved to keep one of a different nature because he guessed that in Beatrice's present temper he would make matters more difficult by staying. And in this he was right, for Beatrice had made up her mind to be thoroughly disagreeable and she possessed the elements of success requisite for that purpose —a sharp tongue, a quick instinct and great presence of mind.

San Miniato descended the stairs and strolled

out into the orange garden, looking at his watch as he left the door of the hotel. It was very hot, but further away from the house the sea breeze was blowing through the trees. He was still smoking the cigarette he had lighted upstairs, and he sat down on a bench in the shade, took out a pocket book and began to make notes. From time to time he looked along the path in the direction of the hotel, which was hidden from view by the shrubbery. Then the clock struck twelve and a few minutes later the church bells began to ring, as they do half a dozen times a day in Italy on small provocation. Still San Miniato went on with his calculations.

Before many minutes more had passed, a trim young figure appeared in the path—a young girl, with pink cheeks and bright dark eyes, no other

than Teresina, the Marchesa's maid. She carried some sewing in her hand and looked nervously behind her and to the right and left as she walked. But there was no one in the garden at that hour. The guests of the hotel were all at breakfast, and the servants were either asleep or at work indoors. The porter was at his dinner and the sailors were presumably eating their midday bread and cheese down by the boats, or dining at their homes if they lived near by. The breeze blew pleasantly through the trees, making the broad polished leaves rustle and the little green oranges rock on the boughs.

As soon as San Miniato caught sight of Teresina he put his note-book into his pocket and rose to his feet. His face betrayed neither pleasure nor surprise as he sauntered along the path, until

he was close to her. Then both stopped, and he smiled, bending down and looking into her eyes.

'For charity's sake, Signor Conte!' cried the girl, drawing back, blushing and looking behind her quickly. 'I ought never to have come here. Why did you make me come?'

'What an idea, Teresina!' laughed San Miniato softly. 'And if you ask me why I wanted you to come, here is the reason. Now tell me, Teresinella, is it a good reason or not?'

Thereupon San Miniato produced from his waistcoat pocket a little limp parcel wrapped in white tissue paper and laid it in Teresina's hand. It was heavy, and she guessed that it contained something of gold.

'What is it?' she asked quickly. 'Am I to give it to the Signorina?'

'To the Signorina!' San Miniato laughed softly again and laid his hand very gently on the girl's arm. 'Yes,' he whispered, bending down to her. 'To the Signorina Teresinella, who can have all she asks for if she will only care a little for me.'

'Heavens, Signor Conte!' cried Teresina. 'Was it to say this that you made me come?'

'This and a great deal more, Teresina bella. Open your little parcel while I tell you the rest. Who made you so pretty, carissima? Nature knew what she was doing when she made those eyes of yours and those bright cheeks, and those little hands and this small waist—per Dio—if some one I know were as pretty as Teresinella, all Naples would be at her feet!'

He slipped his arm round her, there in the

shade. Still she held the package unopened in her hand. She grew a little pale, as he touched her, and shrank away as though to avoid him, but evidently uncertain and deeply disturbed. The poor girl's good and evil angels were busy deciding her fate for her at that moment.

'Open your little gift and see whether you like the reason I give you for coming here,' said San Miniato, who was pleased with the turn of the phrase and thought it as well to repeat it. 'Open it, Teresinella, bella, bella—the first of as many as you like—and come and sit beside me on the bench there and let me talk a little. I have so much to say to you, all pretty things which you will like, and the hour is short, you know.'

Poor girl! He was a fine gentleman with a very great name, as Teresina knew, and he was

young still and handsome, and had winning ways, and she loved gold and pretty speeches dearly. She looked down, still shrinking away from him, till she stood with her back to a tree. Her fresh young face was almost white now and her eyelids trembled from time to time, while her lips moved though she was not conscious of what she wanted to say.

'Ah, Teresina!' he exclaimed, with a nicely adjusted cadence of passion in the tone. 'What are you waiting for, my little angel? It is time to love when one is young and the world is green, and your eyes are bright, carina! When the heart beats and the blood is warm! And you are made for love—that mouth of yours—like the red carnations—one kiss Teresinella—that is all I ask—one kiss and no more,—here in the shade

while no one is looking—one kiss, carina mia—there is no sin in kissing——'

And he tried to draw her to him. But either Teresina was naturally a very good girl, or her good angel had demolished his evil adversary in the encounter which had taken place. There is an odd sort of fierce loyalty very often to be found at the root of the Sicilian character. She looked up suddenly and her eyes met his. She held out the little package still unopened.

'You have made a mistake, Signor Conte,' she said, quietly enough. 'I am an honest girl, and though you are a great signore I will tell you that if you had any honour you would not be making love to me out here in the garden while you are paying court to the Signorina when you are in the house, and doing your best to marry her. It

is infamous enough, what you are doing, and I am not afraid to tell you so. And take back your gold, for I do not want it, and it is not clean! And so good-day, Signor Conte, and many thanks. When you asked me to come here, I thought you had some private message for the Signorina.'

During Teresina's speech San Miniato had not betrayed the slightest surprise or disappointment. He quietly lighted a cigarette and smiled good-humouredly all the time.

'My dear Teresina,' he said, when she had finished, 'what in the world do you think I wanted of you? Not only am I paying court to your signorina, as you say, but I am already betrothed to her, since last night. You did not know that?'

'The greater the shame!' exclaimed the girl, growing angry.

'Not at all, my dear child. On the contrary, it explains everything in the most natural way. Is it not really natural that on the occasion of my betrothal I should wish to give you a little remembrance, because you have always been so obliging, and have been with the Marchesa since you were a child? I could not do anything else, I am sure, and I beg you to keep it and wear it. And as for my telling you that you are pretty and young and fresh, I do not see why you need be so mortally offended at that. However, Teresina, I am sorry if you misunderstood me. You will keep the little chain?'

'No, Signor Conte. Take it. And I do not believe a word you say.'

She held out the parcel to him, but he, still smiling, shook his head and would not take it. Then she let it drop at his feet, and turned quickly and left him. He watched her a moment, and his annoyance at his discomfiture showed itself plainly enough, so soon as she was not there to see it. Then he shrugged his shoulders, stooped and picked up the package, restored it to his waistcoat pocket and went back to his bench.

'It is a pity,' he muttered, as he took out his note-book again. 'It would have been such good practice!'

An hour later Bastianello was sitting alone in the boat, under the awning, enjoying the cool breeze and wishing that the ladies would go for a sail while it lasted, instead of waiting until late in the afternoon as they generally did,

at which time there was usually not a breath of air on the water. He was smoking a clay pipe with a cane stem, and he was thinking vaguely of Teresina, wondering whether Ruggiero would never speak to her, and if he never did, whether he, Bastianello, might not at last have his turn.

A number of small boys were bathing in the bright sunshine, diving off the stones of the breakwater and running along the short pier, brown urchins with lithe thin limbs, matted black hair and beady eyes. Suddenly Bastianello was aware of a small dark face and two little hands holding upon the gunwale of his boat. He knew the boy very well, for he was the son of the Son of the Fool.

'Let go, Nennè!' he said; 'do you take us for a bathing house?'

'You have a beautiful pair of padroni, you and your brother,' observed Nennè, making a hideous face over the boat's side.

Bastianello did not move, but stretched out his long arm to take up the boat-hook, which lay within his reach.

'If you had seen what I saw in the garden up there just now,' continued the small boy. 'Madonna mia, what a business!'

'Eh, you rascal? what did you see?' asked the sailor, turning the boat-hook round and holding it so that he could rap the boy's knuckles with the butt end of it.

'There was the Count, who is Ruggiero's padrone, trying to kiss your signora's maid, and offering her the gold, and she—yah!' Another hideous grimace, apparently of delight, interrupted the narrative.

'What did she do?' asked Bastianello quietly. But he grew a shade paler.

'Eh? you want to know now, do you? What will you give me?' inquired the urchin.

'Half a cigar,' said Bastianello, who knew the boy's vicious tastes, and forthwith produced the bribe from his cap, holding it up for the other to see.

'What did she do? She threw down the gold and called him an infamous liar to his face. A nice padrone Ruggiero has, who is called a liar and an infamous one by serving maids. Well, give me the cigar.'

'Take it,' said the sailor, rising and reaching out.

The urchin stuck it between his teeth, nodded his thanks, lowered himself gently into the water

so as not to wet it, and swam cautiously to the breakwater, holding his head in the air.

Bastianello sat down again and continued to smoke his pipe. There was a happy look in his bright blue eyes which had not been there before.

CHAPTER X

BASTIANELLO sat still in his boat, but he no longer looked to seaward, facing the breeze. He kept an eye on the pier, looking out for his brother, who had not appeared since the midday meal. The piece of information he had just received was worth communicating, for it raised Teresina very much in the eyes of Bastianello, and he did not doubt that it would influence Ruggiero in the right direction. Bastianello, too, was keen enough to see that anything which gave him an opportunity of discussing the girl with his brother might be of advantage, in that it might bring

Ruggiero to the open expression of a settled purpose—either to marry the girl or not. And if he once gave his word that he would not, Bastianello would be no longer bound to suffer in silence as he had suffered so many weeks. The younger of the brothers was less passionate, less nervous and less easily moved in every way than the elder, but he possessed much of the same general character and all of the same fundamental good qualities—strength, courage and fidelity. In his quiet way he was deeply and sincerely in love with Teresina, and meant, if possible and if Ruggiero did not take her, to make her his wife.

At last Ruggiero's tall figure appeared at the corner of the building occupied by the coast-guard station, and Bastianello immediately whistled to him, giving a signal which had served the

brothers since they were children. Ruggiero started, turned his head and at once jumped into the first boat he could lay hands on and pulled out alongside of his brother.

'What is it?' he asked, letting his oars swing astern and laying hold on the gunwale of the sail boat.

'About Teresina,' answered Bastianello, taking his pipe from his mouth and leaning towards his brother. 'The son of the Son of the Fool was swimming about here just now, and he hauled himself half aboard of me and made faces. So I took the boat-hook to hit his fingers. And just then he said to me, "You have a beautiful pair of masters you and your brother." "Why?" I asked, and I held the boat-hook ready. But I would not have hurt the boy, because he is one of ours. So

he told me that he had just seen the Count up there in the garden of the hotel, trying to kiss Teresina and offering her the gold, and I gave him half a cigar to tell me the rest, because he would not, and made faces.'

'May he die murdered!' exclaimed Ruggiero in a low voice, his face as white as canvas.

'Wait a little, she is a good girl,' answered Bastianello. 'Teresina threw the gold upon the ground and told the Count that he was an infamous one and a liar. And then she went away. And I think the boy was speaking the truth, because if it were a lie he would have spoken in another way. For it was as easy to say that the Count kissed her as to say that she would not let him, and he would have had the tobacco all the same.'

'May he die of a stroke!' muttered Ruggiero.

'But if I were in your place,' said his brother calmly, 'I would not do anything to your padrone, because the girl is a good girl and gave him the good answer, and as for him—' Bastianello shrugged his shoulders.

'May the sharks get his body and the devil get his soul!'

'That will be as it shall be,' answered Bastianello. 'And it is sure that if God wills, the grampuses will eat him. But we do not know the end. What I would say is this, that it is time you should speak to the girl, because I see how white you get when we talk of her, and you are consuming yourself and will have an illness, and though I could work for both you and me, four arms are better than two, in summer as in winter.

Therefore I say, go and speak to her, for she will have you and she will be better with you than near that apoplexy of a San Miniato.'

Ruggiero did not answer at once, but pulled out his pipe and filled it and began to smoke.

'Why should I speak?' he asked at last. There was a struggle in his mind, for he did not wish to tell Bastianello outright that he did not really care for Teresina. If he betrayed this fact it would be hard hereafter to account for his own state, which was too apparent to be concealed, especially from his brother, and he had no idea that the latter loved the girl.

'Why should you speak?' asked Bastianello, repeating the words, and stirring the ashes in his pipe with the point of his knife. 'Because if you do not speak you will never get anything.'

'It will be the same if I do,' observed Ruggiero stolidly.

'I believe that very little,' returned the other. 'And I will tell you something. If I were to speak to Teresina for you and say, "Here is my brother Ruggiero, who is not a great signore, but is well grown and has two arms which are good, and a matter of seven or eight hundred francs in the bank, and who is very fond of you, but he does not know how to say it. Think well if you will have him," I would say, "and if you will not, give me an honest answer and God bless you and let it be the end." That is how I would speak, and she would think about it for a week or perhaps two, and then she would say to me, "Bastianello, tell your brother that I will have him." Or else she would say, "Bastianello, tell your brother that I

thank him, but that I have no heart in it." That is what she would say.'

'It may be,' said Ruggiero carelessly. 'But of course she would thank, and say "Who is this Ruggiero?" And besides, the world is full of women.'

Bastianello was about to ask the interpretation of this rather enigmatical speech when there was a stir on the pier and two or three boats put out, the men standing in them and sculling them stern foremost.

'Who is it?' asked Bastianello of the boatman who passed nearest to him.

'The Giovannina,' answered the man.

She had returned from her last voyage to Calabria, having taken maccaroni from Amalfi and bringing back wine of Verbicaro. A fine boat, the

Giovannina, able to carry twenty tons in any weather, and water-tight too, being decked with hatches over which you can stretch and batten down tarpaulin. A pretty sight as she ran up to the end of the breakwater, old Luigione standing at the stern with the tiller between his knees and the slack of the main-sheet in his hand. She was running wing and wing, with her bright new sails spreading far over the water on each side. Then came a rattle and a sharp creak as the main-yard swung over and came down on deck, the men taking in the bellying canvas with wide open arms and old Luigione catching the end of the yard on his shoulder while he steered with his knees, his great gaunt profile black against the bright sky. Down foresail, and the good felucca forges ahead and rounds the little breakwater. Let go

the anchor and she is at rest after her long voyage. For the season has not been good and she has been hauled on a dozen beaches before she could sell her cargo. The men are all as brown as mahogany, and as lean as wolves, for it has been a voyage with share and share alike for all the crew and they have starved themselves to bring home more money to their wives.

Then there is some bustle and confusion, as Luigione brings the papers ashore and friends crowd around the felucca in boats, asking for news and all talking at once.

'We have been in your town, Ruggiero,' said one of the men, looking down into the little boat.

'I hope you gave a message from me to Don Pietro Casale,' answered Ruggiero.

'Health to us, Don Pietro is dead,' said the

man, 'and his wife is not likely to live long either.'

'Dead, eh?' cried Bastianello. 'He is gone to show the saints the nose we gave him when we were boys.'

'We can go back to Verbicaro when we please,' observed Ruggiero with a smile.

'Lend a hand on board, will you?' said the sailor.

So Ruggiero made the boat fast with the painter and both brothers scrambled over the side of the felucca. They did not renew their conversation concerning Teresina, and an hour or two later they went up to the hotel to be in readiness for their masters, should the latter wish to go out. Ruggiero sat down on a bench in the garden, but Bastianello went into the house.

In the corridor outside the Marchesa's rooms he met Teresina, who stopped and spoke to him as she always did when she met him, for though she admired both the brothers, she liked Bastianello better than she knew—perhaps because he talked more and seemed to have a gentler temper.

'Good-day, Bastianello,' she said, with a bright smile.

'And good-day to you, Teresina,' answered Bastianello. 'Can you tell me whether the padroni will go out to-day in the boat?'

'I think they will not,' answered the girl. 'But I will ask. But I think they will not, because there is the devil in the house to-day, and the Signorina looks as though she would eat us all, and that is a bad sign.'

'What has happened?' asked Bastianello. 'You can tell me, because I will tell nobody.'

'The truth is this,' answered Teresina, lowering her voice. 'They have betrothed her to the Count, and she does not like it. But if you say anything——' She laughed a little and shook her finger at him.

Bastianello threw his head back to signify that he would not repeat what he had heard. Then he gazed into Teresina's eyes for a moment.

'The Count is worse than an animal,' he said quietly.

'If you knew how true that is!' exclaimed Teresina, blushing deeply and turning away. 'I will ask the Marchesa if she will go out,' she added, as she walked quickly away.

Bastianello waited and in a few moments she came back.

'Not to-day,' she said.

'So much the better. I want to say something to you, Teresina. Will you listen to me? Can I say it here?' Bastianello felt unaccountably nervous, and when he had spoken he regretted it.

'I hope it is good news,' answered the girl. 'Come to the window at the end of the corridor. We shall be further from the door there, and there is more air. Now what is it?' she asked as they reached the place she had chosen.

'It is this, Teresina,' said Bastianello, summoning all his courage for what was the most difficult undertaking of his life. 'You know my brother Ruggiero.'

'Eh! I should think so! I see him every day.'

'Good. He also sees you every day, and he sees how beautiful you are, and now he knows how good you are, because the little boy of the Son of the Fool saw you with that apoplexy of a Count in the garden to-day, and heard what you said, and came and told me, and I told Ruggiero because I knew how glad he would be.'

'Dio mio!' cried Teresina. She had blushed scarlet while he was speaking, and she covered her face with both hands.

'You need not hide your face, Teresina,' said Bastianello, with a little emotion. 'You can show it to every one after what you have done. And so I will go on, and you must listen. Ruggiero is not a great signore like the Count of San Miniato, but he is a man. And he has two arms which are

good, and two fists as hard as an ox's hoofs, and he can break horse-shoes with his hands.'

'Can you do that?' asked Teresina with an admiring look.

'Since you ask me — yes, I can. But Ruggiero did it before I could, and showed me how, and no one else here can do it at all. And moreover Ruggiero is a quiet man and does not drink nor play at the lotto, and there is no harm in a game of beggar-my-neighbour for a pipe of tobacco on a long voyage when there is no work to be done, and——'

'Yes, I know,' said Teresina, interrupting him. 'You are very much alike, you two. But what has this about Ruggiero to do with me, that you tell me it all?'

'Who goes slowly goes safely, and who goes

safely goes far,' answered Bastianello. 'Listen to me. Ruggiero has also seven hundred and sixty-three francs in the bank, and will soon have more, because he saves his money carefully, though he is not stingy. And Ruggiero, if you will have him, will work for you, and I will also work for you, and you shall have a good house, and plenty to eat and good clothes besides the gold——'

'But Bastianello mio!' cried Teresina, who had suspected what was coming, 'I do not want to marry Ruggiero at all.'

She clasped her hands and gazed into the sailor's eyes with a pretty look of confusion and regret.

'You do not want to marry Ruggiero!' Bastianello's expression certainly betrayed more surprise than disappointment. But he had honestly

pleaded his brother's cause. 'Then you do not love him,' he said, as though unable to recover from his astonishment.

'But no—I do not love him at all, though he is so handsome and good.'

'Madonna mia!' exclaimed Bastianello, turning sharply round and moving away a step or two. He was in great perturbation of spirit, for he loved the girl dearly, and he began to fear that he had not done his best for Ruggiero.

'But you did love him a few days ago,' he said, coming back to Teresina's side.

'Indeed, I never did!' she said.

'Nor any one else?' asked Bastianello suddenly.

'Eh! I did not say that,' answered the girl, blushing a little and looking down.

'Well do not tell me his name, because I should tell Ruggiero, and Ruggiero might do him an injury. It is better not to tell me.'

Teresina laughed a little.

'I shall certainly not tell you who he is,' she said. 'You can find that out for yourself, if you take the trouble.'

'It is better not. Either Ruggiero or I might hurt him, and then there would be trouble.'

'You, too?'

'Yes, I too.' Bastianello spoke the words rather roughly and looked fixedly into Teresina's eyes. Since she did not love Ruggiero, why should he not speak? Yet he felt as though he were not quite loyal to his brother.

Teresina's cheeks grew red and then a little pale. She twisted the cord of the Venetian blind

round and round her hand, looking down at it all the time. Bastianello stood motionless before her, staring at her thick black hair.

'Well?' asked Teresina looking up and meeting his eyes and then lowering her own quickly again.

'What, Teresina?' asked Bastianello in a changed voice.

'You say you also might do that man an injury whom I love. I suppose that is because you are so fond of your brother. Is it so?'

'Yes—and also——'

'Bastianello, do you love me too?' she asked in a very low tone, blushing more deeply than before.

'Yes. I do. God knows it. I would not have said it, though. Ah, Teresina, you have made a traitor of me! I have betrayed my brother —and for what?'

'For me, Bastianello. But you have not betrayed him.'

'Since you do not love him—' began the sailor in a tone of doubt.

'Not him, but another.'

'And that other——'

'It is perhaps you, Bastianello,' said Teresina, growing rather pale again.

'Me!' He could only utter the one word just then.

'Yes, you.'

'My love!' Bastianello's arm went gently round her, and he whispered the words in her ear. She let him hold her so without resistance, and looked up into his face with happy eyes.

'Yes, your love—did you never guess it,

dearest?' She was blushing still, and smiling at the same time, and her voice sounded sweet to Bastianello.

Only a sailor and a serving-maid, but both honest and both really loving. There was not much eloquence about the courtship, as there had been about San Miniato's, and there was not the fierce passion in Bastianello's breast that was eating up his brother's heart. Yet Beatrice, at least, would have changed places with Teresina if she could, and San Miniato could have held his head higher if there had ever been as much honesty in him as there was in Bastianello's every thought and action.

For Bastianello was very loyal, though he thought badly enough of his own doings, and when Beatrice called Teresina away a few minutes

later, he marched down the corridor with resolute steps, meaning not to lose a moment in telling Ruggiero the whole truth, how he had honestly said the best things he could for him and had asked Teresina to marry him, and how he, Bastianello, had been betrayed into declaring his love, and had found, to his amazement, that he was loved in return.

Ruggiero was sitting alone on one of the stone pillars on the little pier, gazing at the sea, or rather, at a vessel far away towards Ischia, running down the bay with every stitch of canvas set from her jibs to her royals. He looked round as Bastianello came up to him.

'Ruggiero,' said the latter in a quiet tone. 'If you want to kill me, you may, for I have betrayed you.'

Ruggiero stared at him, to see whether he were in earnest or joking.

'Betrayed me? I do not understand what you say. How could you betray me?'

'As you shall know. Now listen. We were talking about Teresina to-day, you and I. Then I said to myself, "I love Teresina and Ruggiero loves her, but Ruggiero is first. I will go to Teresina and ask her if she will marry him, and if she will, it is well. But if she will not, I will ask Ruggiero if I may court her for myself." And so I did. And she will tell you the truth, and I spoke well for you. But she said she never loved you. And then, I do not know how it was, but we found out that we loved each other and we said so. And that is the truth. So you had better get a pig of iron from the ballast and knock me on the head,

for I have betrayed my brother and I do not want to live any more, and I shall say nothing.'

Then Ruggiero who had not laughed much for some time, felt that his mouth was twitching under his yellow beard, and presently his great shoulders began to move, and his chest heaved, and his handsome head went back, and at last it came out, a mighty peal of Homeric laughter that echoed and rolled down the pier and rang clear and full, up to the Marchesa's terrace. And it chanced that Beatrice was there, and she looked down and saw that it was Ruggiero. Then she sighed and drew back.

But Bastianello did not understand, and when the laugh subsided at last, he said so.

'I laughed—yes. I could not help it. But you are a good brother, and very honest, and

when you want to marry Teresina, you may have my savings, and I do not care to be paid back.'

'But I do not understand,' repeated Bastianello, in the greatest bewilderment. 'You loved her so——'

'Teresina? No. I never loved Teresina, but I never knew you did, or I would not have let you believe it. It is much more I who have cheated you Bastianello, and when you and Teresina are married I will give you half my earnings, just as I now put them in the bank.'

'God be blessed!' exclaimed Bastianello, touching his cap, and staring at the same vessel that had attracted Ruggiero's attention.

'She carries royal studding-sails,' observed Ruggiero. 'You do not often see that in our part of the world.'

'That is true,' said Bastianello. 'But I was not thinking of her, when I looked. And I thank you for what you say, Ruggiero, and with my heart. And that is enough, because it seems that we know each other.'

'We have been in the same crew once or twice,' said Ruggiero.

'It seems to me that we have,' answered his brother.

Neither of the two smiled, for they meant a good deal by the simple jest.

'Tell me, Ruggiero,' said Bastianello after a pause, 'since you never loved Teresina, who is it?'

'No, Bastianello. That is what I cannot tell any one, not even you.'

'Then I will not ask. But I think I know, now.'

Going over the events of the past weeks in his mind, it had suddenly flashed upon Bastianello that his brother loved Beatrice. Then everything explained itself in an instant. Ruggiero was such a gentleman—in Bastianello's eyes, of course—it was like him to break his heart for a real lady.

'Perhaps you do know,' answered Ruggiero gravely, 'but if you do, then do not tell me. It is a business better not spoken of. But what one thinks, one thinks. And that is enough.'

A crowd of brown-skinned boys were in the water swimming and playing, as they do all day long in summer, and dashing spray at each other. They had a shabby-looking old skiff with which they amused themselves, upsetting and righting it again in the shallow water by the beach beyond the bathing houses.

'What a boat!' laughed Bastianello. 'A baby can upset her and it takes a dozen boys to right her again!'

'Whose is she?' inquired Ruggiero idly, as he filled his pipe.

'She? She belonged to Black Rag's brother, the one who was drowned last Christmas Eve, when the Leone was cut in two by the steamer in the Mouth of Procida. I suppose she belongs to Black Rag himself now. She is a crazy old craft, but if he were clever he could patch her up and paint her and take foreigners to the Cape in her on fine days.'

'That is true. Tell him so. There he is. Ohè! Black Rag!'

Black Rag came down the pier to the two brothers, a middle-aged, bow-legged, leathery fellow

with a ragged grey beard and a weather-beaten face.

'What do you want?' he asked, stopping before them with his hands in his pockets.

'Bastianello says that old tub there is yours, and that if you had a better head than you have you could caulk her and paint her white with a red stripe and take foreigners to the Bath of Queen Giovanna in her on fine days. Why do you not try it? Those boys are making her die an evil death.'

'Bastianello always has such thoughts!' laughed the sailor. 'Why does he not buy her of me and paint her himself? The paint would hold her together another six months, I daresay.'

'Give her to me,' said Ruggiero. 'I will give you half of what I earn with her.'

Black Rag looked at him and laughed, not believing that he was in earnest. But Ruggiero slowly nodded his head as though to conclude a bargain.

'I will sell her to you,' said the sailor at last. 'She belonged to that blessed soul, my brother, who was drowned—health to us—to-day is Saturday—and I never earned anything with her since she was mine. I will sell her cheap.'

'How much? I will give you thirty francs for her.'

Bastianello stared at his brother, but he made no remark while the bargain was being made, nor even when Ruggiero finally closed for fifty francs, paid the money down and proceeded to take possession of the old tub at once, to the infinite and forcibly expressed regret of the lads

who had been playing with her. Then the two brothers hauled her up upon the sloping cement slip between the pier and the bathing houses, and turned her over. The boys swam away, and Black Rag departed with his money.

'What have you bought her for, Ruggiero?' asked Bastianello.

'She has copper nails,' observed the other examining the bottom carefully. 'She is worth fifty francs. Your thought was good. To-morrow she will be dry and we will caulk the seams, and the next day we will paint her and then we can take foreigners to the Cape in her if we have a chance and the signori do not go out. Lend a hand, Bastianello; we must haul her up behind the boats.'

Bastianello said nothing and the two strong men almost carried the old tub to a convenient place for working at her.

'Do you want to do anything more to her to-night?' asked Bastianello.

'No.'

'Then I will go up.'

'Very well.'

Ruggiero smiled as he spoke, for he knew that Bastianello was going to try and get another glimpse of Teresina. The ladies would probably go to drive and Teresina would be free until they came back.

He sat down on a boat near the one he had just bought, and surveyed his purchase. He seemed on the whole well satisfied. It was certainly good enough for the foreigners who liked to be pulled up to the cape on summer evenings.

She was rather easily upset, as Ruggiero had noticed, but a couple of bags of pebbles in the right place would keep her steady enough, and she had room for three or four people in the stern sheets and for two men to pull. Not bad for fifty francs, thought Ruggiero. And San Miniato had asked about going after crabs by torchlight. This would be the very boat for the purpose, for getting about in and out of the rocks on which the crabs swarm at night. Black Rag might have earned money with her. But Black Rag was rather a worthless fellow, who drank too much wine, played too much at the public lottery and wasted his substance on trifles.

Ruggiero's purchase was much discussed that evening and all the next day by the sailors of the Piccola Marina. Some agreed that he had done

well, and some said that he had made a mistake, but Ruggiero said nothing and paid no attention to the gossips. On the next day and the day after that he was at work before dawn with Bastianello, and Black Rag was very much surprised at the trim appearance of his old boat when the brothers at last put her into the water and pulled themselves round the little harbour to see whether the seams were all tight. But he pretended to put a good face on the matter, and explained that there were more rotten planks in her than any one knew of, and that only the nails below the water line were copper after all, and he predicted a short life for Number Fifty-Seven, when Ruggiero renewed the old licence in the little harbour office. Ruggiero, however, cared for none of these things, but ballasted the tub

properly with bags of pebbles and demonstrated to the crowd that she was no longer easy to upset, inviting any one who pleased to stand on the gunwale and try.

'But the ballast makes her heavy to pull,' objected Black Rag, as he looked on.

'If you had arms like the Children of the King,' retorted the Cripple, 'you would not trouble yourself about a couple of hundredweight more or less. But you have not. So you had better go and play three numbers at the lottery, the day of the month, the number of the boat and any other one that you like. In that way you may still make a little money if you have luck. For you have made a bad bargain with the Children of the King, and you know it.'

Black Rag was much struck by the idea and

promptly went up to the town to invest his spare cash in the three numbers, taking his own age for the third. As luck would have it the two first numbers actually turned up and he won thirty francs that week, which, as he justly observed, brought the price of the boat up to eighty. For if he had not sold her he would never have played the numbers at all, and no one pretended that she was worth more than eighty francs, if as much.

Then, one morning, San Miniato found Ruggiero waiting outside his door when he came out. The sailor grew leaner and more silent every day, but San Miniato seemed to grow stouter and more talkative.

'If you would like to go after crabs this evening, Excellency,' said the former, 'the weather

is good and they are swarming on the rocks everywhere.'

'What does one do with them?' asked San Miniato. 'Are they good to eat?'

'One knows that, Excellency. We put them into a kettle with milk, and they drink all the milk in the night and the next day they are good to cook.'

'Can we take the ladies, Ruggiero?'

'In the sail-boat, Excellency, and then, if you like, you and the Signorina can go with me in the little one with my brother, and I will pull while Bastianello and your Excellency take the crabs.'

'Very well. Then get a small boat ready for to-night, Ruggiero.'

'I have one of my own, Excellency.'

'So much the better. If the ladies will not go, you and I can go alone.'

'Yes, Excellency.'

San Miniato wondered why Ruggiero was so pale.

CHAPTER XI

AGAIN the mother and daughter were together in the cool shade of their terrace. Outside, it was very hot, for the morning breeze did not yet stir the brown linen curtains which kept out the glare of the sea, and myriads of locusts were fiddling their eternal two notes without pause or change of pitch, in every garden from Massa to Scutari point, which latter is the great bluff from which they quarry limestone for road making, and which shuts off the amphitheatre of Sorrento from the view of Castellamare to eastward. The air was

dry, hot and full of life and sound, as it is in the far south in summer.

'And when do you propose to marry me?' asked Beatrice in a discontented tone.

'Dearest child,' answered her mother, 'you speak as though I were marrying you by force to a man whom you detest.'

'That is exactly what you are doing.'

The Marchesa raised her eyebrows, fanned herself lazily and smiled.

'Are we to begin the old argument every morning, my dear?' she asked. 'It always ends in the same way, and you always say the same dreadful things to me. I really cannot bear it much longer. You know very well that you bound yourself, and that you were quite free to tell San Miniato that you did not care for him.

A girl should know her own mind before she tells a man she loves him—just as a man should before he speaks.'

'San Miniato certainly knows his own mind,' retorted Beatrice viciously. 'No one can accuse him of not being ready and anxious to marry me —and my fortune.'

'How you talk, my angel! Of course if you had no fortune, or much less than you have, he could not think of marrying you. That is clear. I never pretended the contrary. But that does not contradict the fact that he loves you to distraction, if that is what you want.'

'To distraction!' repeated Beatrice with scorn.

'Why not, dearest child? Do you think a man cannot love because he is poor.'

'That is not the question, mamma!' cried

Beatrice impatiently. 'You know it is not. But no woman can be deceived twice by the same comedy, and few would be deceived once. You know as well as I that it was all a play the other night, that he was trying to find words, as he was trying to find sentiments, and that when the words would not be found he thought it would be efficacious to seize my hand and kiss it. I daresay he thought I believed him—of course he did. But not for long—oh! not for long. Real love finds even fewer words, but it finds them better, and the ring of them is truer, and one remembers them longer!'

'Beatrice!' exclaimed the Marchesa. 'What can you know of such things! You talk as though some man had dared to speak to you——'

'Do I?' asked the girl with sudden coldness,

and a strange look came into her eyes, which her mother did not see.

'Yes, you do. And yet I know that it is impossible. Besides the whole discussion is useless and wears me out, though it seems to interest you. Of course you will marry San Miniato. When you have got past this absurd humour you will see what a good husband you have got, and you will be very happy.'

'Happy! With that man!' Beatrice's lip curled.

'You will,' answered her mother, taking no notice. 'Happiness depends upon two things in this world, when marriage is concerned. Money and a good disposition. You have both, between you, and you will be happy.'

'I never heard anything more despicable!' cried

the young girl. 'Money and disposition! And what becomes of the heart?'

The Marchesa smiled and fanned herself.

'Young girls without experience cannot understand these things,' she said. 'Wait till you are older.'

'And lose what looks I have and the power to enjoy anything! And you say that you are not forcing me into this marriage! And you try to think, or to make me think, that it is all for the best, and all delightful and all easy, when you are sacrificing me and my youth and my life and my happiness to the mere idea of a better position in society—because poor papa was a sulphur merchant and bought a title which was only confirmed because he spent a million on a public charity—and every one knows it—and the Count

of San Miniato comes of people who have been high and mighty gentlemen for six or seven hundred years, more or less. That is your point of view, and you know it. But if I say that my father worked hard to get what he got and deserved it, and was an honest man, and that this great personage of San Miniato is a penniless gambler, who does not know to-day where he will find pocket money for to-morrow, and has got by a trick the fortune my father got by hard work—then you will not like it. Then you will throw up your hands and cry "Beatrice!" Then you will tell me that he loves me to distraction, and you will even try to make me think that I love him. It is all a miserable sham, mamma, a vile, miserable sham! Give it up. I have said that I will marry him, since it appears that I have

promised. But do not try to make me think that I am marrying him of my own free will, or he marrying me out of disinterested, pure, beautiful, upright affection!'

Having delivered herself of these particularly strong sentiments, Beatrice was silent for a while. As for the Marchesa, she was either too wise, or too lazy, to answer her daughter for the present and she slowly fanned herself, lying quite still in her long chair, her eyes half closed and her left hand hanging down beside her.

Indeed Beatrice, instead of becoming more reconciled with the situation she had accepted, was growing more impatient and unhappy every day, as she realised all that her marriage with San Miniato would mean during the rest of her natural life. She had quite changed her mind

about him, and with natures like hers such sudden changes are often irrevocable. She could not now understand how she could have ever liked him, or found pleasure in his society, and when she thought of the few words she had spoken and which had decided her fate, she could not comprehend the state of mind which had led her into such a piece of folly, and she was as angry with herself as, for the time being, she was angry with all the world besides.

She saw, too, and for the first time, how lonely she was in the world, and a deep and burning longing for real love and sympathy took possession of her. She had friends, of course, as young girls have, of much her own age and not unlike her in their inexperienced ideas of life. But there was not one of them at Sorrento, nor had

she met any one among the many acquaintances she had made, to whom she would care to turn. Even her own intimate associates from childhood, who were far away in Sicily, or travelling elsewhere, would not have satisfied her. They could not have understood her, their answers to her questions would have seemed foolish and worthless, and they would have tormented her with questions of their own, inopportune, importunate, tiresome. She herself did not know that what she craved was the love or the friendship of one strong, honest man.

It was strange to find out suddenly how wide was the breach which separated her from her mother, with whom she had lived so happily throughout her childhood and early youth, with whom she had agreed—or rather, who had agreed

with her—on the whole almost without a discussion. It was hard to find in her now so little warmth of heart, so little power to understand, above all such a display of determination and such quiet force in argument. Very indolent women are sometimes very deceptive in regard to the will they hold in reserve, but Beatrice could not have believed that her mother could influence her as she had done. She reflected that it had surely been within the limits of the Marchesa's choice to take her daughter's side so soon as she had seen that the latter had mistaken her own feelings. She need not have agreed with San Miniato, on that fatal evening at Tragara, that the marriage was definitely settled, until she had at least exchanged a word with Beatrice herself.

The future looked black enough on that hot summer morning. The girl was to be tied for life to a man she despised and hated, to a man who did not even care for her, as she was now convinced, to a man with a past of which she knew little and of which the few incidents she had learned repelled her now, instead of attracting her. She fancied how he had spoken to those other women, much as he had spoken to her, perhaps a little more eloquently as, perhaps, he had not been thinking of their fortunes but of themselves, but still always in that high-comedy tone with the studied gesture and the cadenced intonation. She did not know whether they deserved her pity, those two whom he pretended to have loved, but she was ready to pity them, nameless as they were. The one was dead, the

other, at least, had been wise enough to forget him in time.

Then she thought of what must happen after her marriage, when he had got her fortune and could take her away to the society in which he had always lived. There, of course, he would meet women by the score with whom he was and long had been on terms of social intimacy far closer than he had reached with her in the few weeks of their acquaintance. Doubtless, he would spend such time as he could spare from gambling, in conversation with them. Doubtless, he had many thoughts and memories and associations in common with them. Doubtless, people would smile a little and pity the young countess. And Beatrice resented pity and the thought of it. She would rather pity others.

Evil thoughts crossed her young brain, and she said to herself that she might perhaps be revenged upon the world for what she was suffering, for the pain that had already come into her young life, for the wretched years she anticipated in the future, for her mother's horrible logic which had forced her into the marriage, above all for San Miniato's cleverly arranged scene by which the current of her existence had been changed. San Miniato had perhaps gone too far when he had said that Beatrice was kind. She, at least, felt that there was anything but kindness in her heart now, and she desired nothing so much as to make some one suffer something of what she felt. It was wicked, doubtless, as she admitted to herself. It was bad and wrong and cruel, but it was not heartless.

A woman without heart would not have felt enough to resent having felt at all, and moreover would probably be perfectly well satisfied with the situation.

The expression of hardness deepened in the young girl's face as she sat there, silently thinking over all that was to come, and glancing from time to time at her mother's placid countenance. It was really amazing to see how much the Marchesa could bear when she was actually roused to a sense of the necessity for action. Her constitution must have been far stronger than any one supposed. She must indeed have been in considerable anxiety about the success of her plans, more than once during the past few days. Yet she was outwardly almost as unruffled and as lazy as ever.

'Dearest child,' she said at last, 'of course, as I have said, I cannot argue the point with you. No one could, in your present state of mind. But there is one thing which I must say, and which I am sure you will be quite ready to understand.'

Beatrice said nothing, but slowly turned her head towards her mother with a look of inquiry.

'I only want to say, my angel, that whatever you may think of San Miniato, and however much you may choose to let him know what you think, it may be quite possible to act with more civility than you have used during the last few days.'

'Is that all?' asked Beatrice with a hard laugh. 'How nicely you turn your phrases when you lecture me, mamma! So you wish me to be civil. Very well, I will try.'

'Thank you, Beatrice carissima,' answered her

mother with a sigh and a gentle smile. 'It will make life so much easier.'

Again there was a long silence, and Beatrice sat motionless in her chair, debating whether she should wait where she was until San Miniato came, as he was sure to do before long, or whether she should go to her room and write a letter to some intimate friend, which would of course never be sent, or, lastly, whether she should not take Teresina and go down to her bath in the sea before the midday breakfast. While she was still hesitating, San Miniato arrived.

There was something peculiarly irritating to her in his appearance on that morning. He was arrayed in perfectly new clothes of light gray, which fitted him admirably. He wore shoes of

untanned leather which seemed to be perfectly new also, and reflected the light as though they were waxed. His stiff collar was like porcelain, the single pearl he wore in his white scarf was so perfect that it might have been false. His light hair and moustache were very smoothly brushed and combed and his face was exasperatingly sleek. There was a look of conscious security about him, of overwhelming correctness and good taste, of pride in himself and in his success, which Beatrice felt to be almost more than she could bear with equanimity. He bent gracefully over the Marchesa's hand and bowed low to the young girl, not supposing that hers would be offered to him. In this he was mistaken, however, for she gave him the ends of her fingers.

'Good morning,' she said gently.

The Marchesa looked at her, for she had not expected that she would speak first and certainly not in so gentle a tone. San Miniato inquired how the two ladies had slept.

'Admirably,' said Beatrice.

'Ah — as for me, dearest friend,' said the Marchesa, 'you know what a nervous creature I am. I never sleep.'

'You look as though you had rested wonderfully well,' observed Beatrice to San Miniato. 'Half a century, at least!'

'Do I?' asked the Count, delighted by her manner and quite without suspicion.

'Yes. You look twenty years younger.'

'About ten years old?' suggested San Miniato with a smile.

'Oh no! I did not mean that. You look about twenty, I should say.'

'I am charmed,' he answered, without wincing.

'It may be only those beautiful new clothes you have on,' said Beatrice with a sweet smile. 'Clothes make so much difference with a man.'

San Miniato did not show any annoyance, but he made no direct answer and turned to the Marchesa.

'Marchesa gentilissima,' he said, 'you liked my last excursion, or were good enough to say that you liked it. Would you be horrified if I proposed another for this evening—but not so far, this time?'

'Absolutely horrified,' answered the Marchesa. 'But I suppose that if you have made up your mind you will bring those dreadful men with

their chair, like two gendarmes, and they will take me away, whether I like it or not. Is that what you mean to do?'

'Of course, dearest Marchesa,' he replied. 'Donna Beatrice has taught me that there is no other way of accomplishing the feat. And certainly no other way could give you so little trouble.'

'What is the excursion to be, and where?' asked Beatrice pretending a sudden interest.

'Crab-hunting along the shore, with torches. It is extremely amusing, I am told.'

'After horrid red things that run sidewise and are full of legs!' The Marchesa was disgusted.

'They are green when they run about, mamma,' observed Beatrice. 'I believe it is the cooking that makes them red. It will be delightful,' she

added, turning to San Miniato. 'Does one walk?'

'Walk!' exclaimed the Marchesa, a new horror rising before her mental vision.

'We go in boats,' said San Miniato. 'In the sail-boat first and then in a little one to find the crabs. I suppose, Marchesa carissima, that Donna Beatrice may come with me in the skiff, under your eye, if she is accompanied by your maid?'

'Of course, my dear San Miniato! Do you expect me to get into your little boat and hunt for reptiles? Or do you expect that Beatrice will renounce the amusement of getting wet and covered with seaweed and thoroughly unpresentable?'

'And you, Donna Beatrice? Do you still wish to come?'

'Yes. I just said so.'

'But that was at least a minute ago,' answered San Miniato.

'Ah—you think me very changeable? You are mistaken. I will go with you to find crabs to-night. Is that categorical? Must you consult my mother to know what I mean?'

'It will not be necessary this time,' replied the Count, quite unmoved. 'I think we understand each other.'

'I think so,' said Beatrice with a hard smile.

The Marchesa was not much pleased by the tone the conversation was taking. But if Beatrice said disagreeable things, she said them in a pleasant voice and with a moderately civil expression of face, which constituted a concession, after all, considering how she had behaved ever

since the night at Tragara, scarcely vouchsafing San Miniato a glance, answering him by monosyllables and hardly ever addressing him at all.

'My dear children,' said the elder lady, affecting a tone she had not assumed before, 'I really hope that you mean to understand each other, and will.'

'Oh yes, mamma!' assented Beatrice with alacrity. 'With you to help us I am sure we shall come to a very remarkable understanding—very remarkable indeed!'

'With originality on your side, and constancy on mine, we may accomplish much,' said San Miniato, very blandly.

Beatrice laughed again.

'Translate originality as original sin and con-

stancy as the art of acting constantly!' she retorted.

'Why?' inquired San Miniato without losing his temper. He thought the question would be hard to answer.

'Why not?' asked Beatrice. 'You will not deny me a little grain of original sin, will you? It will make our life so much more varied and amusing, and when I say that you act constantly —I only mean what you said of yourself, that you are constant in your actions.'

'You so rarely spare me a compliment, Donna Beatrice, that you must forgive me for not having understood that one sooner. Accept my best thanks——'

'And agree to the expression of my most distinguished sentiments, as the French say at the

end of a letter,' said Beatrice, rising. 'And now that I have complimented everybody, and been civil, and pleased everybody, and have been thanked and have taken all the original sin of the party upon my own shoulders, I will go and have a swim before breakfast. Good-bye, mamma. Good-bye, Count.'

With a quick nod, she turned and left them, and went in search of Teresina, whose duty it was to accompany her to the bath. The maid was unusually cheerful, though she had not failed to notice the change in Beatrice's manner which had taken place since the day of the betrothal, and she understood it well enough, as she had told Bastianello. Moreover she pitied her young mistress sincerely and hated San Miniato with all her heart; but she was so happy herself that she could not possibly hide it.

'You are very glad that I am to be married, Teresina,' said Beatrice as they went out of the house together, the maid carrying a large bag containing bathing things.

'I, Signorina? Do you ask me the real truth? I do not know whether to be glad or sorry. I pray you, Signorina, tell me which I am to be.'

'Oh—glad of course!' returned Beatrice with a bitter little laugh. 'A marriage should always be a matter for rejoicing. Why should you not be glad—like every one else?'

'Like you, Signorina?' asked Teresina with a glance at the young girl's face.

'Yes: like me.' And Beatrice laughed again in the same way.

'Very well, Signorina. I will be as glad as you are. I shall find it very easy.'

It was Beatrice's turn to look at her, which she did, rather suspiciously. It was clear enough that the girl had her doubts.

'Just as glad as you are, Signorina, and no more,' said Teresina again, in a lower voice, as though she were speaking to herself.

Beatrice said nothing in answer. As they reached the end of the path through the garden, they saw Ruggiero and his brother sitting as usual by the porter's lodge. Both got up and came quickly forward. Bastianello took the bag from Teresina's hand, and the maid and the two sailors followed Beatrice at a little distance as she descended the inclined tunnel.

It was pleasant, a few minutes later, to lie in the cool clear water and look up at the blue sky above and listen to the many sounds that came

across from the little harbour. Beatrice felt a sense of rest for the first time in several days. She loved the sea and all that belonged to it, for she had been born within sight of it and had known it since she had been a child, and she always came back to it as to an element that understood her and which she understood. She swam well and loved the easy, fluent motion she felt in the exercise, and she loved to lie on her back with arms extended and upturned face, drinking in the light breeze and the sunshine and the deep blue freshness of sky and water.

While she was bathing Bastianello and Teresina sat together behind the bathing-house, but Ruggiero retired respectfully to a distance and busied himself with giving his little boat a final washing, mopping out the water with an old sponge, which

spot, as

He would

be too

Beatrice was in

Teresina,

brother, and

the cabin, he knew that

Beatrice had finished her bath, and he found little

more to do in cleaning the old tub, which indeed,

to a boatsman's eye, presented a decidedly smart

appearance in her new coat of white paint, with a

scarlet stripe. When he had finished, he saun-

tered up to the wooden bridge that led to the

bathing cabins and sat down on the upper rail,

hooking one foot behind the lower one. Bastian-

ello, momentarily separated from Teresina, came

and stood beside him.

'A couple of fenders would save the new paint on her, if we are going for crabs,' he observed, thoughtfully.

Ruggiero made that peculiar side motion of the head which means assent and approval in the south.

'And we will bring our own kettle for the crabs, and get the milk from the hotel,' continued the younger brother, who anticipated an extremely pleasant evening in the society of Teresina. 'And I have told Saint Peter to bring the torches, because he knows where to get them good,' added Bastianello who did not expect Ruggiero to say anything. 'What time do we go?'

'Towards an hour and a half of the night,' said Ruggiero, meaning two hours after sunset. 'Then the padroni will have eaten and the rocks will be

covered with crabs, and the moon will not be yet risen. It will be dark under Scutari till past midnight, and the crabs will sit still under the torch, and we can take them with our hands as we always do.'

'Of course,' answered Bastianello, who was familiar with the sport, 'one knows that.'

'And I will tell you another thing,' continued Ruggiero, who seemed to warm with the subject. 'You shall pull stroke and I will pull bow. In that way you will be near to Teresina and she will amuse herself the better, for you and she can take the crabs while I hold the torch.'

'And the Signorina and the Count can sit together in the stern,' said Bastianello, who seemed much pleased with the arrangement. 'The best crabs are between Scutari and the natural arch.'

'One knows that,' assented Ruggiero, and relapsed into silence.

Presently the door of the cabin opened and Beatrice came out, her cheeks and eyes fresh and bright from the sea. Of course Bastianello at once ran to help Teresina wring out the wet things and make up her bundle, and Beatrice came towards Ruggiero, who took off his cap and stood bareheaded in the sun as she went by, and then walked slowly behind her, at a respectful distance. To reach the beginning of the ascent they had to make their way through the many boats hauled up beyond the slip upon the dry sand. Beatrice gathered her light skirt in her hand as she passed Ruggiero's newly painted skiff, for she was familiar enough with boats to know that the oil might still be fresh.

'It is quite dry, Excellency,' he said. 'The boat belongs to me.'

Beatrice turned with a smile, looked at it and then at Ruggiero.

'What did I tell you the other day, Ruggiero?' she asked, still smiling. 'You were to call me Signorina. Do you remember?'

'Yes, Signorina. I beg pardon.'

Beatrice saw that Teresina had not yet left the cabin with her bag, and that Bastianello was loitering before the door, pretending or really trying to help her.

'Do you know what Teresina has been telling me, Ruggiero?' asked Beatrice, stopping entirely and turning towards him as they stood in the narrow way between Ruggiero's boat and the one lying next to her.

'Of Bastianello, Signorina?'

'Yes. That she wants to marry him. She told me while I was dressing. You know?'

'Yes, Signorina, and I laughed when he told me the story the other day, over there on the pier.'

'I heard you laughing, Ruggiero,' answered Beatrice, remembering the unpleasant impression she had received when she had looked down from the terrace. His huge mirth had come up as a sort of shock to her in the midst of her own trouble. 'Why did you laugh?' she asked.

'Must I tell you, Signorina?'

'Yes.'

'It was this. Bastianello had a thought. He imagined to himself that I loved Teresina—I!——'

Ruggiero broke off in the sentence and looked

away. His voice shook with the deep vibration that sometimes pleased Beatrice. He paused a moment and then went on.

'I, who have quite other thoughts. And so he said with himself, "Ruggiero loves and is afraid to speak, but I will speak for him." But it was honest of him, Signorina, for he loved her himself. And so he asked her for me first. But she would not. And then, between one word and another, they found out that they loved. And I am very glad, for Teresina is a good girl as she showed the other day in the garden, and the little boy of the Son of the Fool saw it when she threw the gold at that man's feet——'

He stopped again, suddenly realising what he was saying. But Beatrice, quick to suspect, saw the look of pained embarrassment in his face

and almost guessed the truth. She grew pale by degrees.

'What man?' she asked shortly.

Ruggiero turned his head and looked away from her, gazing out to seaward.

'What was the man's name?' she asked again, with the stern intonation that anger could give her voice.

Still Ruggiero would not speak. But his white face told the truth well enough.

'On what day was it?' she inquired, as though she meant to be answered.

'It was the day when you talked with me about my name, Signorina.'

'At what time?'

'It must have been between midday and one o'clock.'

Beatrice remembered how on that day San Miniato had given a shallow excuse for not remaining to breakfast at that hour.

'And what was his name?' she now asked for the third time.

'Excellency — Signorina — do not ask me!' Ruggiero was not good at lying.

'It was the Conte di San Miniato, Ruggiero,' said Beatrice in a low voice that trembled with anger. Her face was now almost as white as the sailor's.

Ruggiero said nothing at first, but turned his head away again.

'Per Dio!' he ejaculated after a short pause. But there was no mistaking the tone.

Beatrice turned away and with bent head began to walk towards the ascent. She could not

help the gesture she made, clenching her hands once fiercely and then opening them wide again; but she thought no one could see her. Ruggiero saw, and understood.

'She is saying to herself, "I must marry that infamous animal,"' thought Ruggiero. 'But I do not think that she will marry him.'

At the foot of the ascent, Beatrice turned and looked back. Teresina and Bastianello were coming quickly along the little wooden bridge, but Ruggiero was close to her.

'You have not done me a good service to-day, Ruggiero,' she said, but kindly, dreading to wound him. 'But it is my fault, and I should not have pressed you as I did. Do not let the thought trouble you.'

'I thank you, Signorina. And it is true that

this was not a good service, and I could bite out my tongue because it was not. But some Saint may give me grace to do you one more, and that shall be very good.'

'Thank you, Ruggiero,' said Beatrice, as the maid and the other sailor came up.

CHAPTER XII

BEATRICE did not speak again as she slowly walked up the steep ascent to the hotel. Bastianello and Teresina exchanged a word now and then in a whisper and Ruggiero came last, watching the dark outline of Beatrice's graceful figure, against the bright light which shone outside at the upper end of the tunnel. Many confused thoughts oppressed him, but they were like advancing and retreating waves breaking about the central rock of his one unalterable purpose. He followed Beatrice till they reached the door of the house. Then she turned and smiled at him, and turned

again and went in. Bastianello of course carried the bag upstairs for Teresina, and Ruggiero stayed below.

He was very calm and quiet throughout that day, busying himself from time to time with some detail of the preparations for the evening's excursion, but sitting for the most part alone, far out on the breakwater where the breeze was blowing and the light surf breaking just high enough to wet his face from time to time with fine spray. He had made up his mind, and he calmly thought over all that he meant to do, that it might be well done, quickly and surely, without bungling. To-morrow, he would not be sitting out there, breathing in the keen salt air and listening to the music of the surging water, which was the only harmony he had ever loved.

His was a very faithful and simple nature, and since he had loved Beatrice, it had been even further simplified. He thought only of her, he had but one object, which was to serve her, and all he did must tend to the attainment of that one result. Now, too, he had seen with his eyes and had understood in other ways that she was to be married against her will to a man she hated and despised, and who was already betraying her. He did not try to understand how it all was, but his instinct told him that she had been tricked into saying the words she had spoken to San Miniato at Tragara, and that she had never meant them. That at least was more comprehensible to him than it might have been to a man of Beatrice's own class. Her head had been turned for a moment, as Ruggiero would have said, and afterwards she

had understood the truth. He had heard many stories of the kind from his companions. Women were changeable, of course. Every one knew that. And why? Because men were bad and tempted them, and moreover because they were so made. He did not love Beatrice for any moral quality she might or might not possess, he was far too human, and natural and too little educated to seek reasons for the passion that devoured him. Since he felt it, it was real. What other proof of its reality could he need? It never entered his head to ask for any, and his heart would not have beaten more strongly or less rudely for twenty reasons, on either side.

And now he was strangely happy and strangely calm as he sat there by himself. Beatrice could never love him. The mere idea was absurd be-

yond words. How could she love a common man like himself? But she did not love San Miniato either, and unless something were done quickly she would be forced into marrying him. Of course a mother could make her daughter marry whom she pleased. Ruggiero knew that. The only way of saving Beatrice was to make an end of San Miniato, and that was a very simple matter indeed. San Miniato would be but a poor thing in those great hands of Ruggiero's, though he was a well-grown man and still young and certainly stronger than the average of fine gentlemen.

Of course it was a great sin to kill San Miniato. Murder was always a sin, and people who did murder and died unabsolved always went straight into eternal fire. But the eternal fire did not impress Ruggiero much. In the first place Beatrice

would be free and quite happy on earth, and in the natural course of things would go to Heaven afterwards, since she could have no part whatever in San Miniato's destruction. Secondly, San Miniato would be with Ruggiero in the flames, and throughout all eternity Ruggiero would have the undying satisfaction of having brought him there without any one's help. That would pay for any amount of burning, in the simple and uncompromising view of the future state which he took.

So he sat on the block of stone and listened to the sea and thought it all over quietly, feeling very happy and proud, since he was to be the means of saving the woman he loved. What more could any man ask, if he could not be loved, than to give his soul and his body for such a good and

just end? Perhaps Ruggiero's way of looking at the present and future state might have puzzled more than one theologian on that particular afternoon.

While Ruggiero was deciding matters of life and death in his own way, with absolute certainty of carrying out his intentions, matters were not proceeding smoothly on the Marchesa's terrace. The midday breakfast had passed off fairly well, though Beatrice had again grown silent, and the conversation was carried on by San Miniato with a little languid help from the Marchesa. The latter was apparently neither disturbed nor out of humour in consequence of the little scene which had taken place in the morning. She took a certain amount of opposition on Beatrice's part as a matter of course, and was prepared to be very long-suffering with the girl's moods, partly because

it was less trouble than to do battle with her, and partly because it was really wiser. Beatrice must grow used to the idea of marriage and must be gradually accustomed to the daily companionship of San Miniato. The Marchesa, in her wisdom, was well aware that Beatrice would never see as much of him when he was her husband as she did now that they were only engaged. San Miniato would soon take up his own life of amusement by day and night, in his own fashion, and Beatrice on her side would form her own friendships and her own ties as best pleased her, subject only to occasional interference from the Count, when he chanced to be in a jealous humour, or when it happened that Beatrice was growing intimate with some lady who had once known him too well.

After breakfast, as usual, they drank coffee and smoked upon the terrace, which Beatrice was beginning to hate for its unpleasant associations. Before long, however, she disappeared, leaving her mother and San Miniato together.

The latter talked carelessly and agreeably at first, but insensibly led the conversation to the subject of money in general and at last to the question of Beatrice's marriage settlement in particular. He was very tactful and would probably have reached this desired point in the conversation in spite of the Marchesa, had she avoided it. But she was in the humour to discuss the matter and let him draw her on without opposition. She had thought it all over and had determined what she should do. San Miniato was surprised, and not altogether agreeably, by

her extreme clearness of perception when they actually arrived at the main discussion.

'You are aware, San Miniato mio,' she was saying, 'that my poor husband was a very rich man, and you are of course familiar—you who know everything—with the laws of inheritance in our country. As our dear Beatrice is an only child, the matter would have been simple, even if he had not made a will. I should have had my widow's portion and she would have had all the rest, as she ultimately will.'

'Of course, dearest Marchesa. I understood that. But it is most kind of you to tell me about the details. In Beatrice's interest—and her interests will of course be my first concern in life——'

'Of course, carissimo,' said the Marchesa, in-

terrupting him. 'Can I doubt it? Should I have chosen you out of so many to be my son-in-law if I had not understood from the first all the nobility and uprightness of your fine character?'

'How good you are to me!' exclaimed San Miniato, who mistrusted the preamble, but was careful not to show it.

'Not at all, dear friend! I am never good. It is such horrible trouble to be either good or bad, as you would know if you had my nerves. But we were speaking of my poor husband's will. One half of his fortune of course he was obliged to leave to his daughter. He could dispose of the other half as he pleased. I believe it was that admirable man, the first Napoleon, who invented that just law, was it not? Yes, I was sure. My

husband left the other half to me, provided I should not marry—he was a very thoughtful man! But if I did, the money was to go to Beatrice at once. If I did not, however, I was—as I really am—quite free to dispose of it as I pleased.'

'How very just!' exclaimed San Miniato.

'Do you think so? Yes. But further, I wish to tell you that he set aside a sum out of what he left Beatrice, to be her dowry—just a trifle, you know, to be paid to her husband on the marriage, as is customary. But all the remainder, compared with which the dowry itself is insignificant, does not pass into her hands until she is of age, and of course remains entirely in her control.'

'I understand,' said San Miniato in a tone which betrayed some nervousness in spite of his

best efforts to be calm, for he had assuredly not understood before.

'Of course you understand, dearest friend,' answered the Marchesa. 'You are so clever and you have such a good head for affairs, which I never had. I assure you I never could understand anything about money. It is all so mysterious and complicated! Give me one of your cigarettes, I am quite exhausted with talking.'

'I think you do yourself injustice, dearest Marchesa,' said San Miniato, offering her his open case. 'You have, I think, a remarkably good understanding for business. I really envy you.'

The Marchesa smiled languidly, and slowly inhaled the smoke from the cigarette as he held the match for her.

'I have no doubt you learned a great deal

from the Marchese,' continued San Miniato. 'I must say that he displayed a keenness for his daughter's interests such as merits the sincerest admiration. Take the case, which happily has not arisen, dearest friend. Suppose that Beatrice should discover that she had married a mere fortune-hunter. The man would be entirely in your power and hers. It is admirably arranged.'

'Admirably,' assented the Marchesa without a smile. 'It would be precisely as you say. Beyond a few hundred thousand francs which he would control as the dowry, he could touch nothing. He would be wholly dependent on his wife and his mother-in-law. You see my dear husband wished to guard against even the most improbable cases. How thankful I am that heaven has sent Beatrice such a man as you!'

'Always good! Always kind!' San Miniato bent his head a little lower than was necessary as he looked at his watch. He had something in his eyes which he preferred to hide.

Just then Beatrice's step was heard on the tiled floor of the sitting room, and neither the Marchesa nor San Miniato thought it worth while to continue the conversation with the danger of being overheard.

So the afternoon wore on, bright and cloudless, and when the air grew cool Beatrice and her mother drove out together along the Massa road, and far up the hill towards Sant' Agata. They talked little, for it is not easy to talk in the rattling little carriages which run so fast behind the young Turkish horses, and the roads are not always good, even in summer. But San Miniato

was left to his own devices and went and bathed, walking out into the water as far as he could and then standing still to enjoy the coolness. Ruggiero saw him from the breakwater and watched him with evident interest. The Count, as has been said before, could not swim a stroke, and was probably too old to learn. But he liked the sea and bathing none the less, as Ruggiero knew. He stayed outside the bathing-house fully half an hour, and then disappeared.

'It was not worth while,' said Ruggiero to himself, 'since you are to take another bath so soon.'

Then he looked at the sun and saw that it lacked half an hour of sunset, and he went to see that all was ready for the evening. He and Bastianello launched the old tub between them, and Ruggiero ballasted her with two heavy sacks

of pebbles just amidships, where they would be under his feet.

'Better shift them a little more forward,' said Bastianello. 'There will be three passengers, you said.'

'We do not know,' answered Ruggiero. 'If there are three I can shift them quickly when every one is aboard.'

So Bastianello said nothing more about it, and they got the kettle and the torches and stowed them away in the bows.

'You had better go home and cook supper,' said Ruggiero. 'I will come when it is dark, for then the others will have eaten and I will leave two to look out.'

Bastianello went ashore on the pier and his brother pulled the skiff out till he was alongside of

the sail-boat, to which he made her fast. He busied himself with trifles until it grew dark and there was no one on the pier. Then he got into the boat again, taking a bit of strong line with him, a couple of fathoms long, or a little less. Stooping down he slipped the line under the bags of ballast and made a timber-hitch with the end, hauling it well taut. With the other end he made a bowline round the thwart on which he was sitting, and on which he must sit to pull the bow oar in the evening. He tied the knot wide enough to admit of its running freely from side to side of the boat, and he stowed the bight between the ballast and the thwart, so that it lay out of sight in the bottom. The two sacks of pebbles together weighed, perhaps, from a half to three-quarters of a hundredweight.

When all was ready he went ashore and shouted for the Cripple and the Son of the Fool, who at once appeared out of the dusk, and were put on board the sail-boat by him. Then he pulled himself ashore and moored the tub to a ring in the pier. It was time for supper. Bastianello would be waiting for him, and Ruggiero went home.

As the evening shadows fell, Beatrice was seated at the piano in the sitting-room playing softly to herself such melancholy music as she could remember, which was not much. It gave her relief, however, for she could at least try and express something of what would not and could not be put into words. She was not a musician, but she played fairly well, and this evening there was something in the tones she drew from the

instrument which many a musician might have envied. She threw into her touch all that she was suffering and it was a faint satisfaction to her to listen to the lament of the sad notes as she struck them and they rose and fell and died away.

The door opened and San Miniato entered. She heard his footstep and recognised it, and immediately she struck a succession of loud chords and broke into a racing waltz tune.

'You were playing something quite different, when I came to the door,' he said, sitting down beside her.

'I thought you might prefer something gay,' she answered without looking at him and still playing on.

San Miniato did not answer the remark, for he distrusted her and fancied she might have a retort

ready. Her tongue was often sharper than he liked, though he was not sensitive on the whole.

'Will you sing something to me?' he asked, as she struck the last chords of the waltz.

'Oh yes,' she replied with an alacrity that surprised him. 'I feel rather inclined to sing. Mamma,' she cried, as the Marchesa entered the room, 'I am going to sing to my betrothed. Is it not touching?'

'It is very good of you,' said San Miniato.

The Marchesa smiled and sank into a chair. Beatrice struck a few chords and then, looking at the Count with half-closed eyes, began to sing the pathetic little song of Chiquita.

'On dit que l'on te marie
Tu sais que j'en vais mourir—'

Her voice was very sweet and true and there

was real pathos in the words as she sang them. But as she went on, San Miniato noticed first that she repeated the second line, and then that she sang all the remaining melody to it, singing it over and over again with an amazing variety of expression, angrily, laughingly, ironically and sadly.

'—Tu sais que j'en vais mourir!'

she ended, with a strange burst of passion.

She rose suddenly to her feet and shut the lid down sharply upon the key-board.

'How perfectly we understand each other, do we not?' she said sweetly, a moment later, and meeting San Miniato's eyes.

'I hope we always shall,' he answered quietly, pretending not to have understood.

She left him with her mother and went out

upon the terrace and looked down at the black water deep below and at the lights of the yachts and the far reflections of the stars upon the smooth bay, and at the distant light on Capo Miseno. The night air soothed her a little, and when dinner was announced and the three sat down to the table at the other end of the terrace her face betrayed neither discontent nor emotion, and she joined in the conversation indifferently enough, so that San Miniato and her mother thought her more than usually agreeable.

At the appointed time the two porters appeared with the Marchesa's chair, and Teresina brought in wraps and shawls, quite useless on such a night, and the little party left the room in procession, as they had done a few days earlier when they started for Tragara. But their mood was

very different to-night. Even the Marchesa forgot to complain and let herself be carried down without the least show of resistance. On the first excursion none of them had quite understood the other, and all of them except poor Ruggiero had been in the best of humours. Now they all understood one another too well, and they were silent and uneasy when together. They hardly knew why they were going, and San Miniato almost regretted having persuaded them. Doubtless the crabs were numerous along the rocky shore and they would catch hundreds of them before midnight. Doubtless also, the said crustaceans would be very good to eat on the following day. But no one seemed to look forward to the delight of the sport or of the dish afterwards, excepting Teresina and Bastianello

who whispered together as they followed last. Ruggiero went in front carrying a lantern, and when they reached the pier it was he who put the party on board, made the skiff fast astern of the sail-boat and jumped upon the stern, himself the last of all.

The night breeze was blowing in gusts off the shore, as it always does after a hot day in the summer, and Ruggiero took advantage of every puff of wind, while the men pulled in the intervals of calm. The starlight was very bright and the air so clear that the lights of Naples shone out distinctly, the beginning of the chain of sparks that lies like a necklace round the sea from Posilippo to Castellamare. The air was soft and dry, so that there was not the least moisture on the gunwale of the boat. Every one was silent.

Then on a sudden there was a burst of music. San Miniato had prepared it as a surprise, and the two musicians had passed unnoticed where they sat in the bows, hidden from sight by the foresail so soon as the boat was under way. Only a mandolin and a guitar, but the best players of the whole neighbourhood. It was very pretty, and the attempt to give pleasure deserved, perhaps, more credit than it received.

'It is charming, dearest friend!' was all the Marchesa vouchsafed to say, when the performers paused.

Beatrice sat stony and unmoved, and spoke no word. She said to herself that San Miniato was again attempting to prepare the scenery for a comedy, and she could have laughed to think that he should still delude himself so completely.

Teresina would have clapped her hands in applause had she dared, but she did not, and contented herself with trying to see into Bastianello's eyes. She was very near him as she sat furthest forward in the stern-sheets and he pulled the starboard stroke oar, leaning forward upon the loom, as the gust filled the sails and the boat needed no pulling.

'You do not care for the mandolin, Donna Beatrice?' said San Miniato, with a sort of disappointed interrogation in his voice.

'Have I said that I do not care for it?' asked the young girl indifferently. 'You take too much for granted.'

Grim and silent on the stern sat Ruggiero, the tiller in his hand, his eye on the dark water to landward constantly on the look-out for the gusts

that came down so quickly and which could deal treacherously with a light craft like the one he was steering. But he had no desire to upset her to-night, nor even to bring the tiller down on his master's head. There was to be no bungling about the business he had in hand, no mistakes and no wasting of lives.

The mandolin tinkled and the guitar strummed vigorously as they neared Scutari point, vast, black and forbidding in the starlight. But a gloom had settled upon the party which nothing could dispel. It was as though the shadow of coming evil had overtaken them and were sweeping along with them across the dark and silent water. There was something awful in the stillness under the enormous bluff, as Ruggiero gave the order to stop pulling and furl the sails, and he himself

brought the skiff alongside by the painter, got in and kept her steady, laying his hand upon the gunwale of the larger boat. Bastianello stood up to help Beatrice and Teresina.

'Will you come, Donna Beatrice?' asked San Miniato, wishing with all his heart that he had never proposed the excursion.

It seemed absurd to refuse after coming so far and the young girl got into the skiff, taking Ruggiero's hand to steady herself. It did not tremble to-night as it had trembled a few days ago. Beatrice was glad, for she fancied that he was recovering from his insane passion for her. Then San Miniato got over, rather awkwardly as he did everything so soon as he left the land. Then Teresina jumped down, and last of all Bastianello. So they shoved off and pulled away

into the deep shadow under the bluffs. There the cliff rises perpendicularly seven hundred feet out of the water, deeply indented at its base with wave-worn caves and hollows, but not affording a fast hold anywhere save on the broad ledge of the single islet of rock from which a high natural arch springs suddenly across the water to the abrupt precipice which forms the mountain's base.

Calmly, as though it were an every-day excursion, Ruggiero lighted a torch and held it out when the boat was alongside of the rocks, showing the dark green crabs that lay by dozens motionless as though paralysed by the strong red glare. And Bastianello picked them off and tossed them into the kettle at his feet, as fast as he could put out his hands to take them. Teresina tried,

too, but one almost bit her tender fingers and she contented herself with looking on, while San Miniato and Beatrice silently watched the proceedings from their place in the stern.

Little by little Ruggiero made the boat follow the base of the precipice, till she was under the natural arch.

'Pardon, Excellency,' he said quietly, 'but the foreigners think this is a sight with the torches. If you will go ashore on the ledge, I will show it you.'

The proposal seemed very natural under the circumstances, and as the operation of picking crabs off the rocks and dropping them into a caldron loses its interest when repeated many times, Beatrice immediately assented.

The larger boat was slowly following and the

tinkle of the mandolin, playing waltz music, rang out through the stillness. Ruggiero brought the skiff alongside of the ledge where it was lowest.

'Get ashore, Bastianello,' he said in the same quiet tone. Bastianello obeyed and stood ready to help Beatrice, who came next.

As she stepped upon the rock Ruggiero raised the torch high with one hand, so that the red light fell strong and full upon her face, and he looked keenly at her, his eyes fixing themselves strangely, as she could see, for she could not help glancing down at him as she stood still upon the ledge.

'Now Teresina,' said Ruggiero, still gazing up at Beatrice.

Teresina grasped Bastianello's hand and sprang ashore, happy as a child at the touch. San

Miniato was about to follow and had already risen from his seat. But with a strong turn of his hand Ruggiero made the stern of the skiff swing out across the narrow water that is twenty fathoms deep between the mountain and the islet.

'What are you doing?' asked San Miniato impatiently. 'Let me land!'

But Ruggiero pushed the boat's head off and she floated free between the rocks.

'You and I can take a bath together,' said the sailor very quietly. 'The water is very deep here.'

San Miniato started. There was a sudden change in Ruggiero's face.

'Land me!' cried the Count in a commanding tone.

'In hell!' answered the sailor's deep voice.

At the same moment he dropped the torch, and seizing the bags of ballast that lay between his feet, hove them overboard, springing across the thwarts towards San Miniato as he let them go. The line slipped to the side as the heavy weight sank and the boat turned over just as the strong man's terrible fingers closed round his enemy's throat in the darkness. San Miniato's death cry rent the still air—there was a little splashing, and all was done.

So I have told my tale, such as it is, how Ruggiero of the Children of the King gave himself body and soul to free Beatrice Granmichele from a life's bondage. She wore mourning a whole year for her affianced husband, but the mourning in her heart was for the strong, brave,

unreasoning man, who, utterly unloved, had given all for her sake, in this world and the next.

But when the year was over, Bastianello married Teresina, and took her to the home he had made for her by the sea—a home in which she should be happy, and in which at least there can never be want, for Beatrice has settled money on them both, and they are safe from sordid poverty, at all events.

The Marchesa's nerves were terribly shaken by the tragedy, but she has recovered wonderfully and still fans herself and smokes countless cigarettes through the long summer afternoon.

Of those left, Bastianello and Beatrice are the most changed—both, perhaps, for the better. The sailor is graver and sterner than before, but he still has the gentleness which was never his

brother's. Beatrice has not yet learned the great lesson of love in her own heart, but she knows and will never forget what love can grow to be in another, for she has fathomed its deepest depth.

And now you will tell me that Ruggiero did wrong and was a great sinner, and a murderer, and a suicide, and old Luigione is sure that he is burning in unquenchable fire. And perhaps he is, though that is a question neither you nor I can well decide. But one thing I can say of him, and that you cannot deny. He was a man, strong, whole-hearted, willing to give all, as he gave it, without asking. And perhaps if some of us could be like Ruggiero in all but his end, we should be better than we are, and truer, and more worthy to win the love of woman and better able to keep it. And that is all I have to

say. But when you stand upon the ledge by Scutari, if you ever say a prayer, say one for those two who suffered on that spot. Beatrice does sometimes, though no one knows it, and prayers like hers are heard, perhaps, and answered.

THE END

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